



# Dollars and Decadence

Making Sense of  
the US-UAE Relationship

Colin Powers

April 2021



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# About

## Middle East and North Africa Program

Our research efforts are oriented by the counter-revolution that swept the Middle East and North Africa in the aftermath of 2011. This counter-revolution has unalterably changed the lives of millions of people. Depending on the place, it has, amongst other things, precipitated civil war, criminalized political expression, stripped citizenries of basic liberties, intensified inequality, and engendered profound social suffering. Metabolizing state-sponsored violence in a diversity of forms, its complex coalition of anti-democratic forces has quietly laid siege to states, societies, and the values of an international order founded on human rights.

Noria's MENA program shall seek to unwind the many permutations and configurations through which the Arab counter-revolution is expressed. Interrogating the political, economic, and ideational dimensions of the phenomenon in question, our team is committed to shining a light on the overt and submerged properties of an issue whose importance cannot be overstated.

## Author

Colin Powers earned his PhD from Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in 2020. He is a two-time recipient of the Fulbright Grant, and his work has been published with Middle East Law and Governance, The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), the Institute of Policy Studies, and the Arab Center-Washington, DC, amongst other places. In addition to serving as the Chief Editor for Noria's MENA Program, Powers is currently the director of The Political Economy of Everything, a web-based research publication that aims to unwind how power, class, and history animate life in the Middle East today.

Powers' current research agenda primarily concerns the drivers of (under)development and irredentist authoritarianism in the contemporary Middle East. Ongoing investigations and writing projects concern the lobbying networks and financial linkages through which regional axes advance anti-democratic projects in western capitals; the economic and logistical sinews of Abu Dhabi's regional interventions; and the prospects and likely consequences of economic liberalization initiatives in the wake of COVID-19.







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# Executive Summary

No state actor has influenced the course of events in the Middle East and North Africa over the past decade more than Abu Dhabi.

Having seized unilateral control of the foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 financial crisis, it would be the diminutive petromonarchy of the al-Nahyan family that went on to steward the opposition to the Arab Spring movements which emerged in late 2010. In frequent partnership with Saudi Arabia, the emirate's Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan inserted himself and his abundant resources into local struggles from the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to the western reaches of the Maghreb and the heart of the Levant. After cozying up closely to the Trump administration, Abu Dhabi's adventurism would grow even bolder in recent times. Backing military strongmen and the oligarchs of ancien régimes through financial, military, and diplomatic means, Abu Dhabi's counter-revolution has proved tragically effective in stifling those seeking political, economic, and social change.

With the Democratic party now in control of the House of Representatives, Senate, and White House for the first time since 2011, a question begs asking: will the changing of the political guard in Washington shift America's outlook on Abu Dhabi's regional project? It is no exaggeration to say that the futures of millions of people across the Middle East and North Africa very much hangs in the balance.

Our report, *Dollars and Decadence*, argues that the Biden administration and its allies in the Congress are unlikely to upend the status quo ante when it comes to the US-UAE relationship, despite having abundant cause for doing so. This prognostication derives in part from the longstanding strategic partnership that Abu Dhabi has developed with the United States' Department of Defense as well as from its signing of the Abraham Accords with Israel in 2020. It is primarily informed, however, by the nature and depth of Abu Dhabi's entanglements within the American economy, and by the dexterity with which the emirate exploits opportunities furnished by the onset of decadence inside the American political system.

Through excavating financial documents, tracking capital flows, and mapping Abu Dhabi's influence operation inside Washington, *Dollars and Decadence* not only shows how the emirate wins itself supporters within the American capital, but how it stacks the deck against those seeking to challenge its position. Lending insight into the future of the Middle East and North Africa as well as into the ways through which foreign principals affect the business of the American state, the report makes for critical reading for those hoping to change US foreign policy and with it, the fate of a region.

## Key Ideas

- Abu Dhabi's presence within the American economy is greater than is typically understood. The nature of this presence introduces substantial political and economic risks for those attempting to reform the US-UAE relationship.
- Abu Dhabi's influence operations have affected how policymakers conceive of and evaluate issues relevant to the Middle East and North Africa. They have also inculcated sympathy and support for Abu Dhabi's interests amongst leading Democratic party officials.
- Despite Abu Dhabi having unapologetically aligned itself with the Trump administration, our data suggests the Biden

administration and the Congress will both broadly stay the course in engaging the emirate (and its regional designs).

- The consequence of this eventuality for the peoples across the Middle East and North Africa will be profound, auguring the reconsolidation of authoritarian rule and the deepening of economic de-development.
- The consequence of this eventuality for American democracy will prove corrosive, as it will encourage foreign parties to intensify their infringements upon sovereign policy spaces.

## Major Findings

- The UAE's "making of peace" with Israel, consummated through the signing of the Abraham Accords, has solidified its standing amongst large segments of the Democratic party coalition.
- The UAE has more easily swayed Washington than it has regional events in recent times; its position inside the American capital is now critical to its capacity to project power throughout the Middle East and North Africa.
- Abu Dhabi recycles a significant percentage of its oil rents into the American financial system. This report estimates that the value of the emirate's state-controlled portfolio in the United States is in excess of \$250 billion.
- Mubadala and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, Abu Dhabi's two largest sovereign wealth funds, have become deeply entwined with the different nodes of contemporary American finance capital.
- Beyond partnering with America's banks, private equity firms, and asset management giants, the aforementioned sovereign wealth funds also have taken sizable investment positions in the US-based tech and real estate sectors. As is the case with finance, these sectors influence the political sphere in the United States through a diversity of means.
- The patronage provided by Abu Dhabi to American arms' manufacturers is fundamental to the latter's export business and overall viability. The firms benefiting from Abu Dhabi's business have long demonstrated a distinct capacity to affect the conduct of the American state as well.
- The volume, density, and location of US-UAE economic interpenetration have increased the risks of political confrontation substantially. Policymakers and elected officials are therefore structurally incentivized to pursue a status quo oriented approach in engaging Abu Dhabi. In view of the high-leverage friends Abu Dhabi has won through its business dealings, it is conceivable that policymakers and elected officials may also be subject to more discrete forms of pressure when it comes to the UAE's interests.
- Through its embassy, the UAE runs a vertically integrated operation designed to affect how Washington both understands international affairs and conducts its foreign policy. This operation is wholly within the bounds of legality. It is primarily organized to influence think tanks, journalists, and persons directly involved in policymaking processes.
- Through a number of means, Abu Dhabi and its local lieutenants have developed personal relationships with individuals bearing great social capital within the field of Democratic politics.
- The combined effects of economic entanglement and Washington-based operations make it highly unlikely that either the Biden administration or the Congress will seek significant change to the US-UAE relationship.



# Introduction

Since taking the reins of the United Arab Emirates' foreign policy in late 2009, Abu Dhabi has spared neither effort nor expense in positioning itself as one of the United States' most faithful and essential allies. Having spent enormous sums on the wares of American arms' manufacturers as well as forays into lobbying, public communications, and knowledge production—and having eagerly coordinated with the US Armed Forces when and wherever the opportunity arose for the better part of a decade—the UAE's Ambassador to Washington Yousef al-Otaiba could credibly sell an audience in September of 2020 on the notion that his country is “not only in the pro-US camp...We are the cheerleaders of the pro-US camp.” With the flank where it was once most exposed to attack within the American polity covered upon the announcement of the Abraham Accords, little Sparta's privileged status in Washington would appear secure indeed.

And yet, there are reasons to think al-Otaiba's words might ring hollow within certain quarters in the capital, nowhere more so than inside the haunts of the now ascendant Democratic party. The regime he and his many clients serve has, after all, just spent nearly half a decade cynically undermining what the Obama White House believed to be a legacy-defining and world-reshaping foreign policy achievement: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreed to between Iran, the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany, and the European Union in July of 2015. With recent events establishing Abu Dhabi as one of the bygone Trump administration's most intimate collaborationists, as interlopers blithely infringing upon sovereign policy spaces in the United States, and as an entity acting at cross purposes to Democratic designs in theaters stretching from Egypt and Sudan to Yemen, Libya and Syria, causes for frustration with the emirate would also appear to extend well beyond matters concerning Tehran's nuclear program.

## The UAE and the JCPOA

In contesting the JCPOA both before and after its adoption, Muhammad bin Zayed's men deployed means considered fair and foul by the warped standards of Washington. Specific to the former, the UAE's Ambassador actively worked to spread unfounded fears concerning alleged Iranian non-compliance. As regards means more uncouth, the Embassy coordinated a smear campaign with the neoconservative wing of the Israel lobby. This included collaborations with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Likud-aligned organization founded for the initial purpose of providing "education to enhance Israel's image in North America." It also included partnering (and likely funneling resources) to a second American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC)-adjacent institution named United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI). Powered by a board that included the former General Director of the Mossad, a coterie of retired statesmen and intelligence officials, and American foreign policy specialists such as Dennis Ross and Michael Singh, UANI's influence would become especially apparent upon the Trump administration's taking of power. With AIPAC itself leveraging campaign contributions to pressure the Democrats' caucus on Capitol Hill, Abu Dhabi and its bedfellows ultimately muddled the waters around the JCPOA to such a degree as to make the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 politically costless.

Be that as it may, if one expected grievances suffered to push the Democratic party—controlling House, Senate, and White House for the first time since the early 2011—into adopting an adversarial line in engaging Abu Dhabi<sup>1</sup>, early indications suggest this will not be the case. President Biden did issue a temporary freeze on the weapons procurement that Trump had attempted to expedite on the UAE and Saudi Arabia's behalf in the dying light of his tenure. The new commander-in-chief has also brought American support for "offensive operations" in Yemen to an end, though the substantive effect of this decision—particularly as concerns the UAE's less visible interventions in the south—is yet to be determined.

Regardless, as press releases from Secretary of State Antony Blinken's call with UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan evince, the big picture looks little changed when it comes to US-Abu Dhabi relations. In view of America's top diplomat expressing excitement over the "UAE's historic opening with Israel" and over "the opportunities ahead for the UAE to make additional contributions to a more peaceful Middle East"—and his reiterating America's intention to defend the country against regional threats—willful amnesia and a return to the status quo ante very much appear to be the orders

of the day. Such a prognostication finds support in the team President Biden has assembled for the purpose of steering MENA-focused foreign policy as well.

The current Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin comes to his position in the White House after recently serving as commander of CENTCOM and as an advisory board member for the defense contractor Raytheon Technologies, experiences likely to have brought him into close professional and social contact with a number of high-leverage persons from the al-Nahyan regime. The hawkish Brett McGurk, National Security Council coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, arrives at his post having earned a reputation as a harsh critic and antagonist of Turkey and having built comfortable working relationships with the leaderships of both Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi over the course of many years. For her part, Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Barbara Leaf is not only a former Ambassador to the UAE, but an individual that has gone out of her way to stump for the country's interests in her capacity as a private citizen. Testament of this, Leaf was one of the few liberal leaning members of the cognoscenti willing to publicly endorse Abu Dhabi's aforementioned purchase of \$23 billion worth of F-35 fighters, Reaper Drones, and munitions in late 2020.

1 Abu Dhabi represents but one of the seven emirates comprising the federated United Arab Emirates. Home to the vast majority of the Federation's oil reserves and the center of political power since the ascension of Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan—the man broadly regarded as the "father" of the Emirati nation—it has nevertheless long exerted outsized influence within the domain of foreign affairs. Abu Dhabi's dominance in this domain was further consolidated following the onset of Dubai's spiraling debt crisis in 2009 and subsequent need to seek a bailout from its wealthier neighbor.

## The UAE in the Era of Donald Trump

The UAE's relationship with the man who would go on to become the forty-fifth President of the United States actually began during Donald J. Trump's candidacy for the highest position in the land. As was revealed from indictments produced by Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election, the al-Nahyan regime [financed illegal campaign contributions to both Donald J. Trump and his rival Hillary Clinton](#) in the summer preceding November's vote, moneys it trafficked through the persons of George Nader and his client Ahmad Khawaja. In passing moneys (again through Nader) to Joel Zamel's Psy-Group—a firm [directed by retired Israeli intelligence officers and operating in the field of social media manipulation](#)—reporting from The New York Times suggests that Abu Dhabi may have provided covert operational assistance to the Republican contender during the contest as well.

Upon Trump's victory, it was the UAE that also helped build informal lines of communication allowing an inner circle at the White House to disregard official protocols and engage with foreign parties outside the standard channels managed by the State Department and intelligence community. One of these lines was laid down by Tom Barrack. A top Trump fundraiser and the Chairman of his Inaugural Committee, Barrack was also a long-time business partner of [Yousef al-Otaiba \(and his father\) and frequent real estate investment partner for Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth funds](#). Given his positioning, the engineering of a back channel between the Ambassador and high leverage individuals inside the White House was fairly straight forward if deeply consequential.

Amongst other things, this channel would prove critical to the rise of Muhammad bin Salman. It was, after all, by dint of the access thereby provided that al-Otaiba was afforded the space needed to personally vouch for the Saudi prince inside a highly impressionable White House. Combined with the Ambassador's stewarding of MBS's cotillion before elite American society, his playing of consigliere to the administration sufficed to secure Presidential buy-in for a power grab back in Saudi Arabia that had precious few supporters at the CIA, Pentagon, or State Department. That [Kushner allegedly greenlit and personally furnished intelligence to the Saudi Crown Prince](#) as he conducted his palace coup between June and November of 2017 represented both the culmination of Abu Dhabi's efforts and a testament to just how short-circuited the policymaking process had become as a result.

In terms of domestic meddling, one ought also note that Abu Dhabi has been implicated in a number of US-facing espionage scandals over the past four years. The first, not especially artful in design, [involved the cultivation of an American national with access to the White House \(businessman Rashid al-Malik\)](#) as a paid asset of Emirati intelligence. The second and third, more sinister in their nature, each concerned an Abu Dhabi-based "private" cybersecurity firm called DarkMatter. [A Reuters' investigation](#) detailed how the firm recruited former NSA officials to build up its surveillance and hacking capabilities, capabilities that the government in Abu Dhabi would then use not only to target nominal security threats, but hundreds of journalists, human rights activists, and political rivals, Americans very much included. Roughly a year later, [New York Times reporting](#), drawing on an ongoing FBI probe, would trace how the same firm also produced a widely downloaded messaging app called ToTok which granted UAE intelligence a backdoor into the phones of all those who installed it.

## Explaining Teflon Abu Dhabi

In view of the ledger Abu Dhabi has compiled inside Washington and across the region it calls home, how can one understand the tact being followed by the Biden White House and the Democratic caucus on Capitol Hill? Scorned or worse so many times over, how is it that the party's leadership seems willing to allow a veritable flood of water to flow under the bridge when it comes to Abu Dhabi, and how is it that they have decided (with a handful of exceptions in the Congress) to accept the emirate as a trusted and valued ally?

Explanation need begin with the previously referenced Abraham Accords, the signing of which in August 2020 resulted in the UAE and Bahrain joining Jordan and Egypt as the only Arab countries to have officially normalized diplomatic relations with Israel.<sup>2</sup> Changing sentiment amongst younger voters notwithstanding, Israel remains a sacred cow inside of Democratic politics. By consummating their romance and participating in a scheme aiming to abrogate the conditionality upon which Arab recognition of Israel has hinged since 2002—the latter's acceptance of a Palestinian state—it is therefore conceivable that Abu Dhabi's royals would

2 In the period since, Morocco and Sudan also established official diplomatic relations with Israel.

have restored at least some of the esteem lost in the salons of blue Washington. To the extent that the Accords saw the emirate move under the protection of the city's diversifying pro-Israel lobbies—a move that was preceded by Embassy clients the Harbour Group and Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld

aggressively courting a number of the civil society institutions central to the pro-Israel coalition today—the making of “peace” has also made life more difficult for those as yet unwilling to bury the hatchet with Abu Dhabi.

### Laying the Grounds for Coalition

As FARA records indicate, between October of 2019 and November of 2020, Seth Horwitz of the Harbour Group made sixteen political contacts with the American Jewish Committee, four with the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations, and thirteen with the Anti-Defamation League. During the same period, Richard Mintz reported political contacts with the American Sephardic Federation, the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations, and J Street. Central as the Christian Zionist lobby now is to pro-Israel camps in the United States today, it is worth noting that Horwitz also reported six contacts with the Church of Jesus Christ and Latter-Day Saints.

Filings from [Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld](#) in January of 2021, meanwhile, show that between July and December of 2020, the firm engaged the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) three times, the Republican Jewish Committee seven times, the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations eight times, and the American Jewish Committee six times. These filings also provide evidence of explicit coordination between the Harbour Group, Akin Gump, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and AIPAC, the last of which remains the institutional hub of the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. On August 13th, Akin Gump lobbyist Hagir El-Awad, Stephen Schneider of AIPAC, Richard Mintz of the Harbour Group, and Alia Majed Hilal al-Suwaidi all engaged in the same email exchange.

That said, consequential as the Abraham Accords have undeniably been, they are insufficient in elucidating why the Democrats choose conciliation and bonhomie vis-a-vis Abu Dhabi. The generosity of spirit extended to the emirate's leadership, after all, long preceded the concordat's ratification, and hardly wavered throughout all the tumult brought on by Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan's adventurism in Yemen, Libya, Sudan, and Washington.<sup>3</sup> Analyses centering upon the peace arrangement alone are therefore not only ahistorical, but also run the risk of flirting with antisemitic trope—implicitly attributing magic-like powers to pro-Israel institutions within Washington.

What of Abu Dhabi's standing as a local partner of the Department of Defense, and the contributions the emirate makes to that which might be called

the American national interest? Might not this inform why it retains a privileged status in the eyes of both the Republican and Democratic party? As this thesis holds, by helping guarantee the global energy supply, protecting the maritime networks through which that supply flows, funneling oil rents back to Wall Street, proffering field outposts to the American military, and addressing local threats, Abu Dhabi's service to empire earns it dispensation from reprisals, and shelter from any shift in the political winds in Washington.

Such a syllogism is devoid of neither coherence nor insightfulness. Nevertheless, matters of meta-strategy too are but a piece of the puzzle in question. Indeed, even if one were to allow for a moment that the Democratic party or the United States was motivated purely by imperial conceits

<sup>3</sup> Muhammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan is the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. He and his maternal brothers have consolidated control over the public purse and state apparatus of the emirate to a striking extent. They also run the UAE's foreign policy with almost complete autonomy.



in acting abroad, a dubious presupposition, the logic governing the recruitment of Abu Dhabi as a prized local surrogate would be difficult to discern. The emirate's method of ensuring stability and predictability within its local environs has, after all, proven not only manifestly reactionary, but nearsighted and self-defeating from the United States' perspective. Its achievements in balancing against the great bogeyman, Iran, meanwhile, can be classified as disappointing at best, and its zealot's war on the Muslim Brotherhood is starkly incongruous with the measured agnosticism that has traditionally guided the American state's approach to the movement.<sup>4</sup> Having acted in direct opposition to the Pentagon across a number of theaters, a record of insubordination undermines Abu Dhabi's case as an ally as well. Leaving aside whether Washington manages its overseas dealings with any of the design or steely foresight that this argument presents as self-sufficient fact, then, the balance of evidence would still suggest that the odd solidity of US-Abu Dhabi relations cannot solely be attributed to the workings of the grand chessboard.

## The Economics and Sociology of Alliance Maintenance

Without dismissing the potential effects that the Abraham Accords or imperial rationalities have upon the Democratic party's approach to Abu Dhabi, this report is to make the case that the outcome in question be understood in light of two other less frequently discussed causes: the al-Nahyan regime's entanglements within the American economy, and their (legal) exploitation of opportunities opened due to the American political system's accelerating drift into decadence.

In the pages ahead, the first of these causes will be disassembled and probed through the parsing

of international factor movements, scrutiny of banking and trade data, and a granular combing of private transaction histories. Together, this study will reveal the material sinews through which regime-controlled instruments—Abu Dhabi's two largest sovereign wealth funds in particular—have become essential to the orderly functioning of the American economy more generally and the profit rates of fractions of American capital more specifically. Presented in conjunction with the UAE's generous patronage of the arms industry<sup>5</sup>, it will be posited that relations of finance and investment affect political behavior in the United States through two primary mechanisms. On the one hand, the volume and density of economic interpenetration creates enormous logistical difficulties for those seeking to politically decouple the United States from the emirate. This is because any destabilization of the relationship threatens to introduce grave uncertainty into markets, if not to precipitate capital flight. This prospect shifts the parameters of deliberation when it comes to matters related to Abu Dhabi to no small degree, and can only but affect the decision matrices of bureaucrats and elected officials.

On the other, in view of the sectors most likely to be affected by political turbulence—finance, tech, real estate, and defense contractors—and the extensive faculties these sectors retain when it comes to influencing policy<sup>6</sup>, entanglement has also vested some of the most powerful actors in the United States with a distinct interest in Abu Dhabi's continued good standing in Washington. This reality not only shifts the endowments that the protagonists and antagonists of Abu Dhabi can bring to bear in a political contest, but increases the cost that those disposed toward confrontation are likely to incur. Further incentivizing relevant parties to adopt a pro-status quo position regarding Muhammad bin Zayed et alia, the particular friends and partners Abu Dhabi

4 For an insightful study of the United States' historical engagements with the Muslim Brotherhood, see [Mohamed-Ali Adraoui's analysis here](#).

5 Should Abu Dhabi's \$23 billion order of American-made arms from this past August ultimately be processed and treated as an export entry for 2020, it alone would constitute more than 33% the gross yield of US exports to the Middle East and North Africa for the year. Per the [National US-Arab Chamber of Commerce](#), US exports to the Middle East and North Africa fell to \$45.66 billion in 2020. If one adds the arms deal referenced above (\$23 billion) to that sum, the total value of exports would be \$68.66 billion.

6 These faculties include though are not limited to (i) the financing of candidates; (ii) the administration of aggressive lobbying operations; (iii) the leveraging of expertise and social ties; (iv) the population of government with industry insiders; (v) the mobilization of media; and (v) the capital strike.

has cultivated through its business dealings may exert a more immediate and discretionary effect on our dependent variable, and thereby complement the structural compulsions already at work.

If interrogation of this first cause helps reveal the forces restricting political actors' freedom of movement and the effects this can have on policy choice, examination of the second—Abu Dhabi's exploitation of decadence—serves to illuminate some of the ideational, institutional, and microsociological processes through which said actors have come to back the emirate by their own accord. Using a mixed-method approach, this analysis will hone in on the means through which Abu Dhabi takes advantage of two specific opportunities furnished by the onset of decadence in the United States in order to court and sway the political classes in Washington. Seizing chances afforded by the American state's relinquishment and/or outsourcing of critical functions and prerogatives, the study will first demonstrate how the UAE's Embassy and proxies curate many of the informational flows undergirding issue conceptualization and debate in Congress and beyond. Seizing chances afforded by the growing commoditization of the access, networks, and

knowledge one acquires through employment in government, it will next establish how Abu Dhabi has ingratiated itself within the contemporary power elite, senior Democrats included.

In shaping the epistemic environment of the policy community and embedding individuals and institutions within the regime's social networks, these constructivist ventures within the American polity will be shown to have affected Abu Dhabi's position in Washington to a non-insignificant degree. Through ways diffuse and acute, the emirate's navigation of onsetting decadence in the American capital has thereby played a critical role in shaping contemporary bilateral relations, and the Democratic party's contributions to them.

Though neither of the causalities just discussed ought imply the existence of determinism or conspiracy, they do boost the probability that the current administration will continue to choose conciliation in engaging Abu Dhabi in the months and years ahead. By detailing such rarely examined aspects of American foreign policymaking, our report provides scholarly and policy communities with greater insight into an incredibly salient relationship.

### The Emergence of The Modern Access Merchant Trade

Historically speaking, the commoditization of access, networks, and knowledge accelerated considerably in the late 1990s. Powered primarily by the alumni of the Clinton White House—many of whom had just finished retrofitting the state for the neoliberal era—entirely new industries adjacent to but separate from lobbying were developed at this time. As government affairs and strategic relations took shape and grew in stature, more and more opportunities were created for individuals who know their way around the state to traffic in rolodexes, little black books, and insider information.

Private firms started by Clinton White House alumni that are in the business of helping domestic and foreign clients influence and/or navigate the American state (as well as foreign governments, in some instances) include: the Albright Stonebridge Group (founder: Madeline Albright); the Cohen Group (founder: William Cohen); the Finsbury Glover Park Group (founders: Carter Eskew, Michael Feldman, Joe Lockhart, and Chip Smith); the Harbour Group (founders: Joel Johnson and Richard Markus); the Ickes & Enright Group (founders: Harold Ickes and Janice Ann Enright); Teneo Strategy (Founders: Declan Kelly, Paul Keary, and Doug Band); Quinn Gillespie Associates (Jack Quinn and Ed Gillespie; Gillespie is a republican operator); and KARV Communications (founder: Andrew Franks), amongst many others.

# 1. The Ties That Bind

## How Abu Dhabi Invests in its American Partnership

Early indications suggest that the US-Abu Dhabi relationship is unlikely to be subjected to substantive revisions now that the Democratic party controls the White House, Senate, and House of Representatives for the first time since 2011. This is so despite Abu Dhabi having unapologetically aligned itself with the Trump administration, despite it having paid little heed to the sovereignty of American domestic affairs in recent times, and despite its record of acting in opposition to Democratic policy goals overseas.

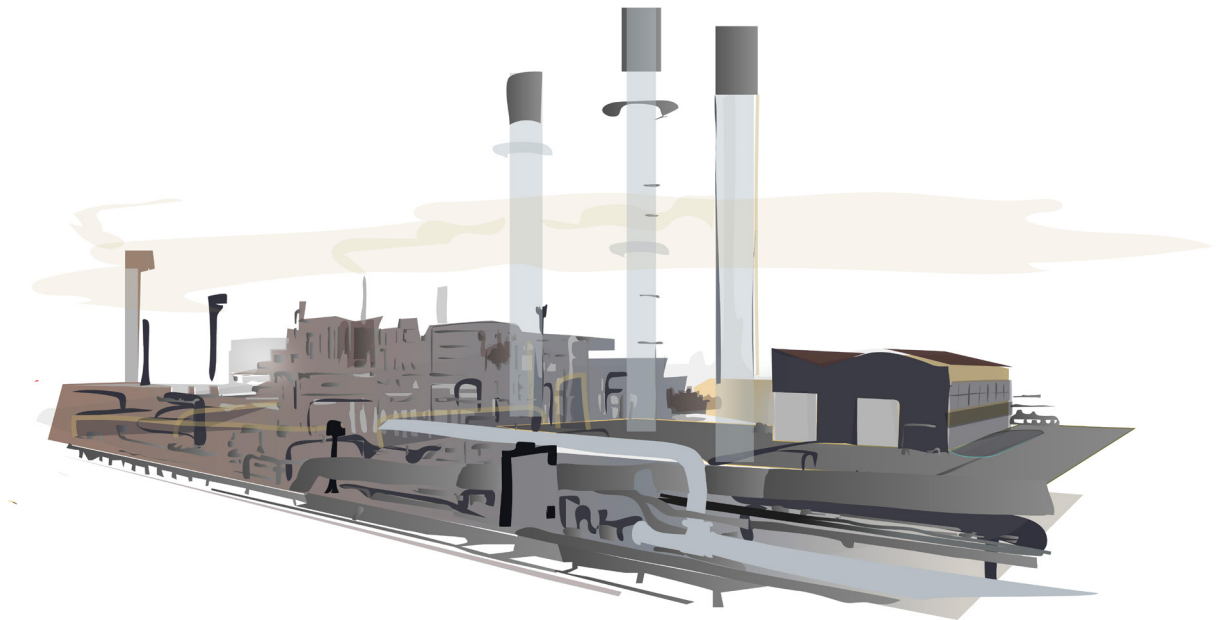
Explanations of the American outlook on Abu Dhabi often center on matters of national security, positing that the emirate's standing in Washington derives from the strategic utility it affords the United States in external theaters. Charting a less trodden course, this chapter is to draw out the contributions that economic entanglement makes to US-Abu Dhabi relations, and to explore how this variable may illuminate the odd and potentially self-defeating posture currently being adopted by the Democratic party vis-a-vis the UAE.

The causal relation connecting economic entanglement to foreign policy outcomes operates through two primary mechanisms. On the one hand, the volume and density of interpenetration create enormous logistical difficulties for those seeking to change the nature of the US-Abu Dhabi bilateral relationship. Any destabilization on the political front, after all, threatens to introduce grave uncertainty into markets, and could potentially trigger capital flight. This prospect shifts the parameters structuring deliberation as concerns matters of diplomacy and international affairs to a non-insignificant degree. On the other, in view of the sectors most likely to be affected by political turbulence—finance, tech, real estate, and defense contractors—and the extensive faculties they retain when it comes to influencing the political classes, economic entanglement has also resulted in some of the most powerful actors in the United States being vested with a distinct interest in Abu Dhabi's continued good standing in

Washington.

As will become clear, these first and second-order effects of economic entanglement impact the decision matrices of bureaucrats and elected officials through a number of different registers, and mediate the odd behavior hitherto observed to a considerable extent. To gain better purchase on such causalities, the three major axes through which economic entanglement has been deepened—finance, investment, and consumption—need be unwound.

Toward this end, in terms of chapter organization, we will begin by considering financial interpenetration and the relationships that Abu Dhabi's two largest sovereign wealth funds—the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) and Mubadala Investment Company (Mubadala)—have cultivated with key players on Wall Street. From here, we will proceed to an examination of the emirate's investment position in US-based markets. We will conclude, finally, by probing the consequences of Abu Dhabi's insatiable demand for American-made arms.



# 1.1 Modern Petrodollar Recycling

The technologies and praxes through which Abu Dhabi reroutes rents derived from oil and natural gas production into the American financial system have evolved from those that managed the recycling of petrodollars in the 1970s. Regardless, the upshot of the transference of capital thereby conducted is much the same. Indeed, despite the UAE having developed an enormous commercial banking sector of its own in the intervening period<sup>1</sup>, the country persists in parking a staggering amount of cash and assets with the various entities on Wall Street.<sup>2</sup>

## Abu Dhabi and the Banks

To give some sense for the magnitude, as of September 2020, data furnished by the [US Treasury Department's International Capital Reporting System](#) showed that American commercial banks held liabilities to UAE persons/corporate persons totaling roughly \$45.2 billion. These are significant sums relative to other foreign nationals, as even a superficial comparative analysis can clarify: at the same date, American banks held liabilities of \$6.2 billion vis-a-vis Chilean persons, \$32.1 billion vis-a-vis Bahrainis, \$35.6 billion vis-a-vis Brazilians, and \$29 billion vis-a-vis Spaniards.

Generally speaking, the only economies exceeding the UAE in terms of cash deposits and securities stored with American commercial banks are behemoths such as China; tax havens such as the Virgin Islands, Ireland, and the Netherlands; and countries whose economies are functionally coextensive with the United States', such as Canada's. This is so despite Abu Dhabi's largest two

sovereign wealth funds (SWFs), ADIA and Mubadala, taking steps to distance themselves from the American banking sector post-2008—a move, it should be said, that stemmed from a longstanding legal dispute between ADIA and Citigroup Inc.<sup>3</sup>

If such numbers lend insight into the traditional custodial relationship connecting American commercial banks to the UAE, recent transactions with American investment banks reveal the modern means through which Abu Dhabi entwines itself within finance capital in the United States. Herein, one ought to begin with the bond market.

Over the past handful of years, [American investment banks have become amongst the principal underwriters of UAE sovereign debt](#). This is no small business. Though trending upward since 2016, the pandemic, concomitant collapse in oil prices, and consequent imperiling of public revenue streams across the GCC area has further goosed demand for the banks' services. Consequently, the fees that JPMorgan, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, and even the once shunned Citigroup now derive from purchasing and then auctioning Abu Dhabi's dollar-denominated government securities are large enough so as to constitute one of the major growth areas within their respective regional operations. Where the sinews laid by deposits and long-term securities had already bound Wall Street to Abu Dhabi, then, capital flows introduced by the burgeoning bond market have undoubtedly buttressed them to an even greater degree.<sup>4</sup>

The same can be said of joint investment arrangements. A longer standing form of partnership between Abu Dhabi and New York's investment banks, arrangements of this type have developed steadily over the past decade, with Goldman Sachs' frequently one of the main

- 1 The biggest banks in the UAE at the time of writing are First Abu Dhabi Bank, the Dubai-based Emirates NBD, Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank, Mashreq Bank, and the Dubai Islamic and Abu Dhabi Islamic Banks, respectively.
- 2 It should be noted that UAE-based parties continue to hold a relatively large amount of American sovereign debt as well. As of October 2020, residents of the UAE held \$18.9 billion worth of long-term US Treasury securities and \$10.2 billion worth of short-term US Treasury securities. While these holdings are not enormous in relative terms, they are hardly negligible.
- 3 The dispute in question stems from ADIA's claim that Citigroup furnished it with fraudulent information in 2007, on the basis of which it made a \$7.5 billion investment in the then teetering investment bank.
- 4 On the topic of relationship building through debt issues, one ought also note that in August of 2020, [JP Morgan sponsored ADIA's entrance into the Treasury Repo Market in the United States](#), a clearinghouse type facility where hedge funds, pension funds, and other large and predominantly American investors exchange repurchase contracts backed by US Treasury securities.

beneficiaries on the American side.<sup>5</sup> In 2011, for instance, Abu Dhabi's largest sovereign wealth fund, ADIA, contributed \$475 million to Goldman's Whitehall Real Estate Fund in 2011—its [largest hotel portfolio](#) at the time. Only a few months ago, ADIA and a handful of partners also pumped [\\$300 million into a rights issue of the India-based ReNew Power](#), a long-standing growth prospect for Goldman though one the bank has been keen to seek a partial exit from. Mubadala, the second largest of Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth funds, participates in joint ventures of these types regularly as well. Testament of this, the European Commission has only just [approved the acquisition of Calisen](#), a supplier of electricity and gas meters within the UK, by a consortium of Mubadala, Goldman, the asset management giant Blackrock Inc., and the private equity firm KKR & Co Inc..

## Abu Dhabi and the New Kings of Wall Street

Mention of the Calisen deal and the latter two parties to it offers a tidy way of segueing into the non-banking fractions of American finance capital with whom Abu Dhabi has also built increasingly close relations in recent times: asset management and private equity. For a number of reasons, firms in both of these sectors have come to acquire enormous gravity within the Wall Street ecosystem.<sup>6</sup> Individually and collectively, they today represent some of the most influential players in the American and global economy.

As is the case with the banks, the al-Nahyan's capital has insinuated and entangled itself within the industries in question through a diversity of mechanisms. The most direct and immediate amongst them is equity purchases. On the asset management side, Mubadala is a major shareholder

in the aforementioned Blackrock, the largest firm in the global asset management business and a firm currently stewarding a [portfolio worth an estimated \\$8.7 trillion](#). The sovereign wealth fund's leadership decided to take this position upon being actively courted by Blackrock chairman and CEO Laurence Fink during the spring of 2020, after which they agreed to join a consortium of investors including Gulf partners, Norway's sovereign wealth fund, and Fidelity Investments (another asset management giant) in [purchasing a \\$14 billion stake in the firm](#). The shares acquired, which were equivalent to roughly 20% of Blackrock's total equity, had become available as a result of PNC Bank's decision to offload its holdings after nearly two and a half decades, and were sold at an approximately 15% discount.

On the private equity (PE) side, data provided by the Securities and Exchange Commission in the United States establishes that ADIA has, since 2007, [retained a relatively significant stake in Apollo Global Management](#). One of the largest players in the private equity game and heir to the investment bank Drexel Burnham, Apollo was chaired by Leon Black, a man ranking amongst the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most influential financiers, from its inception until March of 2021.<sup>7</sup>

For its part, Mubadala has taken a considerably bolder position within the US private equity space. First, from 2007 onward, the SWF [has held a major ownership position in the Carlyle Group](#), the DC-based private equity firm. The original investment, which had been carried out through a fully owned subsidiary called Five Overseas Investment Ltd., secured Mubadala a 7.5% share in what is not only the United States' single largest private equity operation, but a notoriously politically active (and connected) one at that.<sup>8</sup> Having reduced its position slightly over time, at the time of writing, Mubadala currently holds 6.04%

5 This is so despite outstanding legal disputes between Mubadala and Goldman Sachs. The former has accused the latter of [stealing billions of dollars worth of bonds as part of the Malaysian 1MDB scandal](#).

6 Concerning private equity's remarkable rise, read this [article by Gillian Tett](#) or this [in-depth analysis published by McKinsey & Company last year](#). For a sense of the asset management industry's power, see [this report from the Boston Consulting Group](#).

7 It ought be acknowledged that ADIA [did sell some of its shares in Apollo back in 2013](#). Black retired from his post as CEO of Apollo in January after being embroiled in the Jeffrey Epstein scandal. In March of 2021, he stepped down as Chairman as well.

8 Having employed many an ex-President and ex-Secretary of Defense, the Carlyle Group is known to be deeply embedded within the United States' military industrial complex, and to have the capacity to get the ear of both parties' leaderships when it needs to. The firm's relevance to the Democrats' treatment of Abu Dhabi will be discussed at length in Chapter Two of this report. For more on Carlyle's history, see [Dan Briody's \*The Iron Triangle: Inside the Secret World of the Carlyle Group\*](#).



of the Carlyle Group's equity.<sup>9</sup> In addition, [Mubadala acquired a 5% equity position in the San Francisco-based PE firm Silver Lake Partners](#) in September 2020. As will be touched on later, this investment, on whose basis commenced a twenty-five year partnership, has served as one of the main vehicles through which Mubadala has deepened its ties and holdings throughout Silicon Valley. Furthermore, though not an equity purchase, one need note that Mubadala did agree in July of 2020 to become the lead investor in a \$12 billion large-scale direct lending platform launched and directed by the previously referenced Apollo Global Management; the sovereign wealth fund's capital injection into the fund in question was \$1 billion [according to a press release](#).

Providing opportunities to acquire lucrative state-owned assets back in the UAE has been equally effective in entangling Abu Dhabi within these fractions of American finance capital. To date, such opportunities have typically concerned the downstream operations of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), a multi-sector conglomerate forced into partial privatization due to fiscal consolidation-related mandates handed down from above.

On the asset management side, the principal beneficiaries of ADNOC's disassembly have included the two of the largest American firms in the sector: the Vanguard Group and the previously discussed Blackrock. Following a 2017 initial public offering, the former became [the largest foreign equity holder in ADNOC Distribution](#). Two years later, a [twenty-three-year lease agreement](#) saw Blackrock and the private equity firm KKR acquire a 40% stake in eighteen oil pipelines owned and operated by ADNOC for the cost of \$4 billion.<sup>10</sup> Only sixteen months subsequent to that agreement, in June of 2020, a consortium of Blackrock, the New York-based Global Infrastructure Partners, Toronto's Brookfield Asset Management,

and the Blackstone Group would also purchase [49% ownership of ADNOC's pipeline infrastructure for the price of \\$10 billion](#).

Specific to private equity, in addition to KKR and Blackstone's footholds within Abu Dhabi's extractive industries, one ought note that Apollo Global Management led an investment group in acquiring their own 49% stake in ADNOC's Abu Dhabi Property Leasing Holding Company in September 2020. With the investment commenced a long-term strategic partnership within which Apollo et alia will be tasked with using the rental income streams derived from the holding company's \$5.5 billion real estate portfolio for growth-oriented investment.<sup>11</sup>

As ADIA, KKR, and Blackrock's earlier mentioned partnership in the Calisen deal suggested, joint investment arrangements have frequently brought American parties into intimate relation with state properties of Abu Dhabi as well. This is particularly so in the case of private equity.<sup>12</sup> Testifying to the frequency of collaborations with private equity firms, in addition to the Calisen acquisition in the UK, ADIA has also recently partnered with KKR Infrastructure Funds in Italy, where [the SWF is aiming to purchase a large share of KKR's 37.5% holding in FiberCop](#), the subsidiary of Telecom Italia's last-mile broadband network. This past October, Mubadala went into business with KKR as well through a [joint investment in Reliance Industries](#), an India-based multisector conglomerate operating in fields stretching from oil refinement to retail to digital infrastructure and financial services. The second of Abu Dhabi's sovereign wealth funds also partnered with Kohlberg, a slightly smaller private equity firm whose chairman is the son of one of KKR's founders, [in staging a leveraged buyout of the biopharma corporation PCI Pharma Services](#) in August. Looking back a bit further, finally, it was only in October of 2019 that Mubadala agreed to sell the Carlyle Group—in whom it is itself

9 In view of the Carlyle Group's current market capitalization of \$12.93 billion, Mubadala's position is valued at about \$800 million.

10 By dint of this arrangement, Blackrock and KKR receive a 40% share of the tariffs derived from the flows of oil that move through the pipes for the duration of the lease.

11 As regards the American presence in the UAE real estate market, one ought also note that Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway launched a UAE-focused property fund in 2019. Unlike Apollo General Management, however, the Berkshire Hathaway fund does not appear to be connected with a state partner.

12 Asset management firms do engage in joint investment with Abu Dhabi's SWFs as well: at the beginning of January, [ADIA and Blackrock became cornerstone investors in Kuaishou Technology](#), a Beijing-based firm developing a rival product to TikTok.

invested—a 37% equity share in [Cepsa](#), the largest privately owned oil and gas company in Europe. With Mubadala still the majority shareholder, the sovereign wealth fund (SWF) and the Carlyle Group now control the firm as a de facto private partnership.

Before closing on the topic of financial entanglements, one last mechanism pertinent to the asset managers deserves discussion. As established in the reporting of [The Financial Times](#), Blackrock, Franklin Resources, Northern Trust, Invesco, Aberdeen Asset Management, OakTree, Old Mutual Asset Management, State Street, and departments of JPMorgan and Goldman Sachs have all provided investment management services to the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (and earned themselves healthy fees in the process). Though the limits of open-source data make it difficult to ascertain the precise sums currently being overseen by US firms, it is known that approximately 55% of ADIA's asset portfolio<sup>13</sup>—valued at between \$580-820 billion—is handled by external parties. By virtue of the fact that Blackrock et alia represent the largest players in the investment management sector, one can be confident that ADIA's reliance on external parties has redounded to the benefit of American asset management firms to a large degree.

Seen collectively, the combined effect of the relations just surveyed—sealed through bank deposits, bond market transactions, equity acquisitions, joint investments<sup>14</sup>, investment management, and privatization—has been to entwine Abu Dhabi deep within the many fabrics of American finance capital. Now linked to a constellation of entities through a tight and mutually benefiting weave, the al-Nahyan have to no small extent made themselves essential to the predictable workings of Wall Street. This outcome, in conjunction with the sheer scope of the capital

movements connecting the two economies, affects the conditions within which issues proximate to Abu Dhabi's interests are deliberated and contested in the United States, principally through structuring the risk parameters of the actors participating in the policymaking process. If not existential, the dangers and uncertainties that confrontation with Abu Dhabi poses to the financial system are, after all, sufficient in and of themselves to alter the decision matrices of bureaucrats and elected officials alike. While not determining their actions in the final instance, these considerations incentivize relevant parties to seek a more conciliatory approach in engaging the emirate, and are therefore salient to our research question.

What is more, by dint of the unique gravity that finance currently exerts within the American polity, Abu Dhabi's intimate relationship with many of the sector's key players may actuate a more immediate and discretionary effect on political behavior as well. Such a hypothesis is of course partially informed by this fraction of capital's role in the funding of contemporary electoral campaigns and the influence thereby granted to it by both parties.<sup>15</sup> It is also informed, however, by the financial industry's regular staffing of high-level positions with the Executive branch and Federal Reserve; the frequency with which government technocrats consult the sector on matters of economic importance; [the hegemony of finance in the contemporary American economy](#); and the unique power afforded these actors due to the specter of a capital strike.<sup>16</sup> In cultivating partners unsurpassed in their capacity to sway the American state, the benefits derived from Abu Dhabi's imbrication within American finance may extend well beyond matters of dollars and cents.

13 One should note that this percentage is significantly less than it used to be, as ADIA has brought more and more of its investment operations in-house over the past ten years. Back in 2012, it outsourced approximately 75% of its money management to outside parties.

14 As regards co-investment, one should also note that Mubadala ran a joint venture with one of America's class industrial firms—Boston's General Electric—between 2010 and 2015. Targeting commercial finance, clean energy, aviation, and real estate, the two partners collectively managed an investment portfolio worth roughly \$8.5 billion. Most of the assets controlled by the venture were sold to Blackstone Group and subsidiary of Apollo General Management called Midcap Finco.

15 For the 2020 Presidential elections, Wall Street—defined as persons employed in the securities and investment industry—[contributed \\$74 million in campaign donations to Joe Biden](#). Elements within the same industry have also [bankrolled the Republican party for some time now](#).

16 See [this special issue of Politics & Society](#) for a wonderful discussion of the ways through which business communities more generally impact the political sphere in the current era.





## 1.2 Speculating in America: Investment Flows into American Tech and Real Estate

Fortifying the binds laid through financial interpenetration are Abu Dhabi's investments in the American economy proper. Though the aggregate sums involved are staggering in and of themselves, it is their allocation into Silicon Valley and the built environments of the United States that may be most salient in terms of political consequence. This stems from the fact that technology and real estate speculation (especially in luxury markets) have been made increasingly vital not only to the domestic-facing profit rate of American finance capital, but to the growth outlook of the American economy more generally. By purchasing considerable equity in these sectors and in developing joint investments with US-based partners, the al-Nahyan regime has therefore advanced its integration within the dominant fraction of American capital and insinuated itself onto the frontier spaces of the local economy.

Particular to the volumes in question, it ought be acknowledged at the outset that it is difficult to

derive a fully satisfactory estimate. Data provided by the Office of the United States Trade Representative (and confirmed by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) show that the stock of UAE-originating foreign direct investment (FDI) in the United States was roughly \$5.1 billion as of 2019. This measure is not especially meaningful, however, as it only accounts for those investments where an Emirati party has taken controlling ownership of a US-based firm. This being the case, the \$5.1 billion in question captures but a narrow subset of the aggregate international factor movements between the UAE and the United States.<sup>17</sup> Records furnished by the Treasury Department do manage to widen the aperture, revealing that Emirati residents held \$168.4 billion in US long-term securities as of September 2020, with corporate stocks and bonds accounting for \$138.6 billion of the aggregate sum. Though certainly offering a better view of the UAE's position, the figures in question only represent publicly

<sup>17</sup> Most prominently, FDI does not include all those portfolio investments whereby the foreign party does not take a controlling stake in a firm.

traded assets, and therefore exclude a non-marginal proportion of the country's total investments.

While still sure to leave us far short of the UAE's total investments in the United States, an appraisal of the books of Abu Dhabi's two largest sovereign wealth funds—the aforementioned ADIA and Mubadala—can at least impart a ballpark sense for the emirate's state-controlled stake in America. Specific to ADIA, its 2018 Annual Report—the most recent iteration published—indicates that 35-50% of the SWF's \$580-820 billion portfolio is allocated for investment in North America at any given time. Mubadala's 2019 release, meanwhile, establishes that approximately 38% of its \$230-250 billion portfolio was invested in North America as of the start of 2020. Based on the proposition that that US markets host a significant majority of the SWFs' respective North American investments, it follows that the value of Abu Dhabi's state-controlled portfolio in the United States is in the area of \$250 to \$500 billion.

There are reasons for thinking that the upper bound of this range is closer to the truth. In the period since the annual reports referenced above were published, sources from the business media and corporate intelligence have shown that ADIA expanded its positions in the United States considerably, particularly in the months following the outbreak of the global pandemic. Liam Hunt of Gold IRA Guide has estimated that ADIA and the Kuwait Investment Authority combined to [acquire roughly \\$225 billion worth of distressed publicly traded assets](#) in the spring alone. Significant as these numbers are, they likely only reflect a portion of the business done, as it has been reported that ADIA also made major purchases [outside the stock markets, targeting real estate, infrastructure, and private equity](#) in particular. Even if one were to assume that Mubadala did not join ADIA in making moves inside the US-market post-COVID-19, ADIA's bargain hunting inside American markets would suffice to push the value of Abu Dhabi's US-based portfolio toward half a trillion dollars.

These sums indicate the extent to which Abu Dhabi's public moneys, controlled at the most senior level by Muhammad bin Zayed and his maternal brothers<sup>18</sup>, populate and animate the American economy writ large today. By disaggregating where, precisely, some of these billions have flowed, it is also possible to specify the particular actors and industries that have been most enriched by (and are now most dependent upon) the al-Nahyan's investment flows. What becomes clear after carrying out such a study is that two non-financial sectors are most enmeshed in the capital of Abu Dhabi today: tech and real estate.

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18 The Chairman and Deputy Chairman of ADIA are Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al Nahyan and Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed al Nahyan, and the Managing Director is Sheikh Hamed bin Zayed al Nahyan. The Chairman of Mubadala is Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed al Nahyan, the Vice Chairman Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al Nahyan, and the Managing Director Khaldoon Khalifa al Mubarak.

## Receiving American Investment Back Home

The last thread needing addressing when it comes to unwinding how Abu Dhabi has bound itself to the American economy is the emirate's furnishing of US-based firms with opportunities inside the UAE's home market, a variable touched on earlier during our discussion of ADNOC's privatization.

As was the case in evaluating UAE investment inside the United States, the United States' foreign direct investment stocks in the UAE—\$17.2 billion as of 2019, according to the Office of the United States Trade representative—provide a superficial and incomplete measure for evaluating the breadth of the American presence within the UAE economy. Export values, \$20 billion that same year, widen the aperture slightly, though speak to but one aspect of the US's position in the UAE, too.

Offering a slightly more comprehensive view of the US's connectedness to the Emirati economy is the value of assets held by majority-owned affiliates of US firms within the UAE. Per data released by the Department of the Treasury, those values reached \$51.984 billion as of 2018. Seen in conjunction with the FDI figures listed above as well as the \$15.3 billion worth of long-term Emirati government securities and \$5.4 billion worth of Emirati corporate bonds that were held by American parties as of September 2020, respectively, the degree to which US companies and persons have developed positions (and interests) in the UAE market is far from negligible.

## Abu Dhabi in Silicon Valley

In the case of tech, Abu Dhabi has primarily worked through Mubadala, which has built its position in the sector through a number of different means. If ranked in order of magnitude, the first of these would be the sovereign wealth fund's \$15 billion contribution to SoftBank's \$100 billion Vision Fund in 2017. By dint of this contribution, Mubadala gained large if indirect stakes in many of San Francisco's self-styled market disruptors, including though not limited to Slack, Doordash, Uber, Compass, Fanatics, Ordermark, OakNorth, and WeWork.

Second in the dollar amounts involved would be Mubadala's previously mentioned strategic partnership with the private equity firm Silver Lake Partners (SLP). Fittingly, Mubadala's relationship with SLP had actually begun with a joint investment into Alphabet's Waymo, Google's flagship initiative within the domain of self-driving vehicles. Upon the SWF's subsequent acquisition of equity in SLP itself, it acquired a stake in its partner's \$75 billion investment portfolio, the vast majority of which is spread across much the same scene as SoftBank's Vision Fund. Amongst SLP's biggest holdings at the time of writing are its equity shares in Airbnb, Expedia, SoFi, Twitter, Dell, and Peloton.<sup>19</sup>

Though slightly lesser in terms of capital outlays, Mubadala's more direct forays into American tech have also played a critical role in building both its

investment position and its social network out west. Such forays include (i) the sovereign wealth fund's 2015 acquisition of IBM's Advanced Technology Investment Co., the parent company of the California-based Global Foundries (the world's second largest producer of microchips); (ii) its investments into a number of firms at the intersection of tech and health services, such as UnlearnAI and Outset Medical; (iii) and the 2017 launching of Cognit through a partnership with IBM's artificial intelligence division Watson. They also include Mubadala's establishment of an internally managed \$400 million venture fund in 2019, which it operates out of offices in San Francisco, Abu Dhabi, and London. Though dealing with smaller allotments, in targeting Series A+ investments in the US, the fund has granted the SWF intimate access to the start-up scene out in Silicon Valley to a degree far exceeding any of its other outlays.

<sup>19</sup> As it indicates the closeness of the partnership, one ought note that Silver Lake Partners is also an investor in City Football Group (CFG). CFG is run by Mubadala Managing Director Khaldoon al Mubarak.

## Landlord Abu Dhabi

In contrast to the tech scene, Abu Dhabi's real estate investments in the United States fall under the primary purview of ADIA.<sup>20</sup> In terms of volumes, ADIA's Annual Report from 2018 shows that 5-10% of its gross portfolio is allocated for speculation in property and the built environment. With that same document revealing that the United States absorbs approximately half of ADIA's total investment capital, it can be extrapolated that the value of the sovereign wealth fund's holdings in American land and buildings ranges between \$20-40 billion. Operationally, ADIA runs much of its US-facing real estate investment through the Henley Holding Company<sup>21</sup>, a wholly owned subsidiary. It also invests in funds managed by external third parties such as [Colony Capital, Inc.](#), a firm led by Chairman of Trump's Inaugural Committee Tom Barrack. Additionally, ADIA has indirect forms of investment exposure to the market via its equity holdings in firms like Brookfield Properties, whose assets are valued in area of \$40 billion.

Though not as engaged, Mubadala is not wholly absent from the real estate space. Following its 2018 merger with the Abu Dhabi Investment Council<sup>22</sup> (ADIC)—another of the emirate's sovereign wealth funds (SWF)—in fact, Mubadala became a rather significant passive investor in the market. This is because ADIC has long been the institutional vehicle through which Abu Dhabi's royals have chosen to purchase more glamorous, highly visible properties.<sup>23</sup> New York's Chrysler Building, for instance, which Abu Dhabi acquired a 90% stake in

at the cost of \$800 million back in 2008, was held on ADIC's (and by extension, Mubadala's) books until the SWF offloaded it (at a loss) in 2019.

The consequence of Abu Dhabi's investments vis-a-vis political behavior in the United States ought not be diminished. As was the case with financial entanglements, the magnitude of the moneys involved alone is such as to affect the cost-benefit analyses of persons engaged in political and policy processes relevant to the emirate's interests. While the structuring of incentives does not suffice to guarantee bilateral bonhomie, it does make such an outcome more likely.

In considering the distribution of these moneys, moreover, it seems plausible that investment's effects may be even greater than appears at first blush. This is because in targeting tech and real estate in particular, the emirate's sovereign wealth funds are helping lift up two sectors that, though riddled with issues (not the least of which is leverage)<sup>24</sup>, are fundamental to the profit rate of contemporary American capitalism all the same. It is reasonable to think that such contributions afford Abu Dhabi more leeway from policymakers than might otherwise be the case. In addition, in view of how exposed much of Wall Street is to the bubbles in these sectors, the SWFs' positions therein only further heighten Abu Dhabi's already considerable importance in the eyes of American finance, whose economic and political influence we have already established.

Most importantly of all perhaps, Abu Dhabi's investments into tech and real estate engender the second-order effect of bringing the regime into close

20 If only because the publicity and magnitude of the acquisitions made, one should note that private persons from the UAE are highly invested in the US property market as well. Such parties typically target commercial and residential assets in major cities. According to the research of the market consultancy Knight Frank, in the twelve months preceding September of 2020, Gulf-residing investors were responsible for 15.4% of all global cross-border property investment in the United States. While Saudi, Qatari, Bahraini, and Kuwaiti public and private persons are clearly contributing to these inflows, it can nevertheless be assumed that UAE persons represent a significant source for these investment flows.

21 Henley Holding Company, in conjunction with Canada's Public Sector Pension Investment Board, purchased Exeter Property Group's \$3.15 billion, 58 million square foot industrial real estate portfolio in 2015.

22 ADIC's board is chaired by Muhammad bin Zayed al Nahyan and also includes of the same maternal brothers that fill the boards of ADIA and Mubadala. The principal distinction between the entity and the others is at the level of the Managing Director, which, in the case of ADIC, is Eissa Mohamed al Suwaidi. Mubadala's property investments are mostly focused Abu Dhabi's home market.

23 These transactions have often been executed through partnerships with one of the Abu Dhabi's major banks.

24 Issues with the American real estate market revealed themselves quite clearly in triggering the financial crisis of 2007-2008. As for tech, one need recognize that the viability of many of the giant firms in the sector precariously relies upon the continuing receipt of speculative investment. Running enormous losses each year and with prospects of profitability dependent on either the achievement of monopoly market share or some hitherto unseen technological breakthrough, firms like Uber do not actually make a great deal of sense as businesses. Should investors get skittish on these realities, much of the sector could collapse.

relation with two sectors as deft at any other when it comes to throwing their weight around Washington. Where once content to target the domains of municipal and state politics<sup>25</sup>, the American real estate industry is increasingly engaged in swaying the national capital today, [as research from the Center for Responsive Politics reveals](#). Like Wall Street, meanwhile, Big Tech is both amongst the [biggest financiers of the Democratic party in modern times](#) and responsible for one of the [most imposing lobbying operations](#) seen in the contemporary period. In providing a prime [landing spots for former staffers of the Obama White House](#), the firms falling under this moniker have means of accessing the Biden administration and the Congress outside the traditional channels as well.

Were that not enough to establish Big Tech's political gravity, [federal disclosures from March of 2021 also show that many of Biden's top officials personally retain \(or retained up until recent divestments\) considerable financial interests in the industry](#).

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, for instance, served on the Advisory Council for Microsoft between 2017 and 2020, holds sizable stock shares in both Microsoft and Alphabet, and has consulted for Uber Technologies in the past; Susan Rice, who leads the White House Domestic Policy Council, was a board member for Netflix Inc. until this past December; coronavirus czar Jeff Zients served on the board of directors for Facebook through the middle of 2020; and Louisa Terrell, Director of Legislative Affairs at the White House, worked as public policy director for Facebook prior to coming to taking her post with the administration.

Whether one speaks of the logistical challenges inherent to disentanglement, the risks posed by Abu Dhabi's disinvestment from the American economy, or the friends accumulated through moneys allocated, Abu Dhabi's investments into US markets have clearly raised the price of political confrontation. Such a reality is unlikely to have been lost on the political classes, senior Democrats included.

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25 Real estate's impacts on local politics have been amply discussed [in the works of G. William Domhoff](#).

## 1.3 Keeping the Military Industrial Complex Turning

Alas, economic entanglement is achieved not only through finance and investment, but consumption as well. Indeed, one of the most consequential variables that need be accounted for in unwinding the UAE's relation to the American economy concerns Abu Dhabi's standing as one of largest overseas clients of US arms manufacturers.

In terms of business done, for the period stretching between 2011 and the end of 2018, data recorded in the SIPRI Arms Transfers database shows only two foreign parties exceeding the value of goods purchased by the UAE from the United States, which was \$8.018 billion for the years in question.<sup>26</sup> As the method through which this sum was calculated excluded all sub-\$1 million arms purchases—and as data related to the overseas transactions of private firms in the arms trade is often unreliable<sup>27</sup>—it is appropriate to also assume that UAE's weapons-related transactions with public and private American parties in these years was actually considerably larger than reported.<sup>28</sup>

Things have changed little in the intervening period. Analyses put together by William Hartung's team at the Center for International Policy estimate that Abu Dhabi purchased \$4.74 billion worth of American weapons in 2019.<sup>29</sup> Inclusive of Foreign Military Sales (i.e. US government transfers of defense articles<sup>30</sup>) and Direct Commercial Sales (i.e. direct exports of

private US firms), the big ticket items contributing to this sum are a \$2.73 billion deal for a Patriot Missile System, a \$900 million deal for an Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System, an \$102 million deal for Javelin Guided Missiles, an \$80 million deal for RQ-21A Blackjack Unmanned Air Vehicles, a \$325.52 million deal for the FMU-152A/B Joint Programmable Bomb Fuze System, and an \$830.3 million deal for CH-47F Chinook Cargo Helicopters. Enormous as these figures are, business done with public and private American entities in 2020 was more than five times greater than was the case the year prior. Though some of its orders are still under review, the major prospective acquisitions for 2020 include \$10.4 billion worth of F-35 jet planes, \$2.97 billion worth of MQ-9B Drones, and \$10 billion worth of air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions.

If already manifest, the meaningfulness of the UAE's insatiable demand for American-made arms can nevertheless be more easily discerned through contextualization. As concerns the defense manufacturers themselves—an industry of profound political influence<sup>31</sup>—it is critical to first recognize the extent to which the collective welfare of the sector hinges upon the servicing of Arab clientele. Hartung et al have estimated that in 2019, a wholly unremarkable year, the governments of the Middle East and North Africa purchased 36.57% of all American defense products sold overseas. As Abu

26 The two parties exceeding the UAE in the value of goods purchases were South Korea at \$8.227 billion and Saudi Arabia at \$16.678 billion.

27 First, defense manufacturers often sell their wares to third party entities, which complicates tracking the final consumer of the trade. Second, government record keeping re: the defense trade, which falls under the purview of the State Department, is subject to considerable time lags.

28 Should its order be processed, the value American arms exports to Abu Dhabi in 2020 will be greater than the value of all US-made arms sold to Qatar, Pakistan, India, Germany, Greece, and Canada between 2011 and the end of 2018.

29 Hartung and his colleagues at the Security Assistance Monitor (hosted by the Center for International Policy) have estimated that the subset of Saudi and UAE purchases from United States' parties which were explicitly designated for their war effort in Yemen exceeded \$14 billion as of the spring of 2019.

30 One should note that the goods transferred were typically purchased from private US firms in the first instance.

31 As will be discussed in detail in part three, defense manufacturers are amongst the most politically active firms in Washington. By dint of the significant lobbying operations and their standing as a retirement home for high-ranking military officers—individuals that of course retain close relationships with former colleagues at the Pentagon—these firms exert substantial influence upon those lawmakers and officials who wade into matters of national security.



Dhabi's contribution to regional demand typically exceeds all governments excepting Saudi Arabia's, the data establish that Abu Dhabi's patronization of the American arms industry is fundamental to the latter's viability.

From a macro-outlook, meanwhile, it is critical to recognize the importance that the arms trade has come to acquire for the American economy writ large. This importance is evinced rather baldly by the fact that defense-related products routinely constitute more than 50% of the total value of American exports to the Middle East and North Africa. It is even more starkly illuminated by Abu Dhabi's pending acquisition of F-35s, MQ-9B drones, and munitions. Should this order be processed and treated as a 2020 entry<sup>32</sup>, it alone will make up more than 33% the gross value of US exports to the region for the year.

Abu Dhabi's consumption of the defense industries' wares has also functioned to deepen the emirate's embedding within processes of capital accumulation in the United States.

sketched in this subsection exert a non-marginal effect on policy and political outcomes.

While economic entanglements go a long way toward explaining the ascendant Democratic party's manifest reluctance to confront Abu Dhabi, they do not explain this odd organizational behavior alone. To round out our analysis, we must consider effects introduced by the emirate's exploitation of the American political system's drift into decadence.

## Conclusion

It would be unduly reductionist to posit that American policy toward Abu Dhabi—and the Democratic party's reticence in confronting the emirate—derive purely from the material relations just sketched. It would be similarly flattening and reductionist to posit that American capital shares a singular class interest when it comes to the emirate, or that it acts with purposefulness and cohesiveness in advancing that interest.

In view of the data, however, one cannot empirically refute the fact that particular fractions within American capital (and particularly influential ones at that) retain vested stakes when it comes to the al-Nahyan family's continued good standing inside Washington. Seen in conjunction with the depth of interpenetration evinced by the economies of the United States and Abu Dhabi more broadly, it therefore seems appropriate to posit that the material relations

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32 Per the [National US-Arab Chamber of Commerce](#), US exports to the Middle East and North Africa fell to \$45.66 billion in 2020. If one adds the arms deal referenced above (\$23 billion) to that sum, the total value of exports would be \$68.66 billion. The UAE's acquisition would therefore be equivalent to more than 1/3 the total amended export total.





# 2. Swaying Washington:

## How Abu Dhabi Exploits Political Decadence

The previous chapter sketched how economic entanglement informs the United States-Abu Dhabi relationship, and why this variable informs the Democratic party's reticence in seeking redress for wrongs suffered at the hands of the emirate in recent times. In this chapter, a second variable highly relevant to the outcome in question—namely, Abu Dhabi's influence operations within Washington—will be brought to the foreground.

Per the introduction, Abu Dhabi's influence operations, like those of other foreign states and special interest groups, exploit conditions and opportunities introduced by decadence's onset within the American political system. Conceptually speaking, decadence as used here refers to particular changes in the character of the American

state and the conduct of governance—changes accelerated though not created by neoliberalism's rise as an ideology and praxis at the end of the last century.<sup>1</sup> In material terms, decadence's spread manifested in the American state's relinquishment of key sovereign prerogatives and in its outsourcing of functions once managed internally, shifts collectively marking the emergence of what can be called the contractor state. As translated into practices of governance, the advancement of decadence saw legislative, deliberative, and administrative processes opened up to external interference to a greater degree than had previously been the case. It also brought about a transformation in the composition and career trajectories of the individuals populating government, as relevant parties began advantaging themselves of the revolving door connecting the

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<sup>1</sup> The American political system has long been animated by the workings of an "iron triangle", i.e. the interactions between elected officials in the Congress, bureaucrats, and special interest groups. That said, since the 1990s, special interest groups of all kinds have acquired expanding power within said triangle, and the boundaries between corporate entities and both branches of government have blurred considerably.

state to corporate entities with increasing frequency.

This chapter aims to unwind how Abu Dhabi navigates decadence in promoting its interests inside of Washington. It will begin by appraising the means through which the UAE's embassy (and the local lieutenants it employs) influence the epistemic environment within which American policymakers operate. From here, it will disassemble how the embassy et alia leverage formal and informal channels to push bureaucrats and elected officials toward desired policy ends. It will conclude, finally, by mapping the diversity of methods through which Abu Dhabi cultivates relations to a milieu of social capital-

rich individuals within the field of liberal politics.

Together, these forays into decadence will be posited to have contributed to the confounding geniality that the Democratic party exhibits toward Abu Dhabi.

Before commencing, it should be stated that Abu Dhabi is far from the only non-national actor playing this game in Washington. Many of its regional rivals—Qatar and Turkey included—also participate, as do governments from across the world. It should be stated as well that the tactics used by Abu Dhabi in exploiting decadence are wholly legal, with the exception of political donations made to the Trump and Clinton campaigns in 2016.

## 2.1 Shaping How the Modern Middle East is Conceived

Abu Dhabi's interventions into the epistemic environs of American foreign policy are sophisticated, vertically integrated, and demonstrably efficacious. Collectively functioning to, on the one hand, produce, launder, and disseminate favorable discourses and, on the other, to screen, elide, and discredit unfavorable ones, the emirate's operations have had considerable effects on cognoscenti and politicians alike, and, by extension, on the United States' engagement with the Middle East and North Africa.

In producing knowledge contents as in preempting them, Abu Dhabi acts indirectly and with varying degrees of removal. Operationally, this is achieved through leveraging the different forms of financing that the UAE embassy allocates to those institutions ceded much of government's intellectual labor in the contemporary era of American politics: think tanks.<sup>2</sup>

### Engaging Washington's Think Tank Industry

The precise amounts involved in the UAE's arrangement's with Washington's think tanks are difficult to ascertain. By dint of think tanks' spurious legal designation as 501(c)3 non-profit organizations, they are exempt from needing to report their funding sources to tax authorities.<sup>3</sup> In addition, despite receiving significant donations from non-national public and private entities and despite exerting a rather obvious effect on both policy and public opinion, the branding of think tanks as independent, apolitical organizations engaged in scientific inquiry has, to date, stopped the Department of Justice from forcing them to abide by the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA). Consequently,

2 The influence of think tanks and similar policy planning institutions is not wholly novel. For their historical function, see G. William Domhoff's update to his classic work, *Studying the Power Elite: Fifty Years of Who Rules America*.

3 Of note, the Center for American Progress and the Heritage Foundation, both of whom have received funding from the UAE in recent years, are registered as 501(c)4's, which allows them to make political donations.

transparency is lacking as concerns both the identity of institutional patrons and the size of a particular patron's contributions.

With only voluntary disclosures and revelations furnished by investigative journalists to work off, estimates of the UAE's spending on epistemic outputs are necessarily conservative. Keeping these caveats in mind, Ben Freeman's report for the Center for International Policy posits that between 2014 and 2018, the UAE donated at least \$15.4 million to eight American think tanks of note: the Aspen Institute, the Atlantic Council, the Belfer Center (at the Harvard Kennedy School), the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Center for American Progress, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the RAND Corporation.

Notably, the figure put forth in Freeman's study did not account for the \$20 million that the UAE allocated to the Middle East Institute between 2016 and 2017; the \$250,000 it paid to the Center for New American Security (CNAS) in exchange for a study on the legal regime governing US exports of military-grade drones; or the undisclosed sums it has invested into Emerge85, a research hub hosted at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and led by Afshin Molavi. The methods Freeman elected in making his estimate also excluded from his calculations the more discretionary sums that Abu Dhabi funneled to the right-wing Hudson Institute and the Foundation for Defense of Democracies through the person of Elliot Broidy—a (soon-to-be disgraced) Republican operative brought into the emirate's orbit through a second (soon-to-be disgraced) proxy, George Nader—as part of its efforts to sully Qatar's reputation. In addition, despite the obvious quality of the author's work, it is pertinent to register that he did not attempt to appraise moneys indirectly routed

to persons otherwise employed at or publishing materials with think tanks. Though difficult to track and verify, such arrangements are of obvious relevance to the broader conflicts of interest affecting the production of outputs at the institutions in question.<sup>4</sup>

Contingent upon the structure of the capital injection itself as well as the recipient institutions' underlying ideological commitments and financial health, respectively, moneys thusly deployed purchase the Embassy and its lieutenants editorial prerogatives varying widely in breadth. These prerogatives have, on certain occasions, been asserted in ways immediate and tactile, though with the exception of the Atlantic Council<sup>5</sup>, bald interventions into the affairs of beneficiaries have proven relatively rare. Editorial influence is more commonly actuated from afar, principally through structuring the incentives of institutions and individual agents in a manner befitting the interests of the sponsor.

In the case of an institution, it would be naive to think that the prospect of the Embassy withdrawing or refusing to renew its commitments would not filter into internal deliberations over research and analysis. Social scientists have long demonstrated that survival and self-reproduction constitute the twin imperatives animating any organization. To the extent that no organization (think tanks included) can survive without mobilizing resources, it follows that acquisitional concerns, which in this instance principally refers to the securing of funding, cannot but mediate leadership's decision-making. It seems reasonable to assume, moreover, that this mediating effect will be particularly acute for those institutions short on cash reserves and/or lacking a diversified donor base.

In the case of an individual agent working within the small and incestual world of DC think tanks, there are reasons to think that the behavioral impacts of

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4 The example of Jon Alterman may lend insight into how this works in practice. Beyond serving as Senior Vice President at the Center for Strategic International Studies, Alterman is also currently employed by the consultancy Teneo Strategy as a Senior Advisor, [a firm holding a \\$2 million contract with a royal charity controlled by the al-Nahyan family](#).

5 Leaked emails revealed that Bilal Saab, former Director of the Atlantic Council's Middle East Peace and Security Initiative, sent UAE Ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba advanced copies of a forthcoming report on US Iran policy that was to be published under the name of David Petraeus, and that he allowed al-Otaiba to provide comments and edit the introduction. It has more recently come to light that Bahaa Hariri, who funds the Atlantic Council's Middle East research department, [has agreed to not "publish any articles that concern Saudi affairs."](#)

donor money may be even more pronounced. In spreading its contributions as it has, after all, the UAE has enmeshed a large majority of one's potential employers in relations of at least partial financial dependence. Uneasy with arguments outside the mainstream consensus as the industry of policy research is in the first instance, this enmeshing only heightens the risks further for those considering coloring outside the lines of the Blob's common sense regarding Abu Dhabi. Indeed, it invests the spectre of a near industry-wide blacklisting with an indubitable realness, most especially for those as yet lacking the parachute of a high profile and/or political connections.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of epistemic outputs, the effect of the UAE's money is perhaps most pernicious in the silence and disattention it can purchase. This effect can be observed through scrutinizing the discursive archives of implicated think tanks. As such an analysis reveals, a majority of the institutions in question evince notable absences when it comes to contents touching on topics viewed as highly

sensitive in Abu Dhabi. Given the obvious importance of the subject matters, these lacunae are most jarring in the cases of the Saudi/Emirati campaign in Yemen and the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.<sup>7</sup> Unsurprisingly, the institutions that do not show these gaps in research are the ones operating from a position of independent financial strength, namely (i) the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which is primarily funded through its substantial endowment; (ii) the Brookings Institute, wealthy in its own right and also receiving support from Qatar; and (iii) the Middle East Institute, which has traditionally managed to secure institutional autonomy through balancing its GCC sponsors against one another.



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- 6 Lest this spectre be thought overstated, [Michele Dunne's coerced resignation from the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East in 2013](#)—where Dunne's position was made untenable due to her refusal to endorse Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's military coup—lends it undeniable realness. Though Dunne's superlative reputation, earned through the decades she spent at the State Department, ensured she would find a landing spot (she was ultimately hired as Director of Carnegie's Middle East Program), those devoid of her pedigree would likely have found jumping between jobs far more difficult.
- 7 [Emails leaked from the Center for American Progress](#) show that Brian Katulis, a Gulf-expert and longtime client cum consigliere of the UAE Ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba, personally helped dilute the statement that the think tank was to put out condemning Khashoggi's murder and recommending serious reforms to the US-Saudi relationship. Ken Gude, one of those advocating for the organization to take a more adversarial position, wound up fired shortly after the press reported on the email leak. As of January 2019, CAP claims to have severed its financial relationship with the UAE Embassy.

## Promoting Abu Dhabi

Elision and erasure, of course, are not the only yield of the UAE's investments into the epistemic environs of Washington: its capital has also returned promotional materials of varying sophistication and subtlety. In certain cases, such materials are expressly ordered and specified in the arrangement agreed to by the think tank. The previously referenced Hudson Institute and Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), for instance, were each covertly contracted by Abu Dhabi in 2017 to transmit anti-Qatar messaging via the hosting of public conferences.<sup>8</sup> More subtly, the Center for New American Security (CNAS) entered into a partnership of this sort with the Embassy as well when it was commissioned to produce an analysis on the US legal regime around drone exports in 2016. Though the original report was not released for public consumption, months after it delivered the output in question to its client, CNAS disseminated an open-access paper calling for the Trump administration to loosen restrictions as concerns drone proliferation. Whether this second version was published to satisfy the terms of contract agreed to with the Embassy or not, functionally, it saw the think tank leverage the imprimatur of its independent standing in order to advocate for reform proposals highly conducive to the interests of its patron without making any acknowledgment of potential the conflicts of interest that potentially informed its recommendations.

If less transactional in nature, a long-standing funding relationship has procured the embassy sympathetic coverage from the Center for Strategic International Studies<sup>9</sup> (CSIS), too. Though stopping well short of hagiography, the archive of the organization shows its researchers to be unambiguously generous when it comes to matters proximate to the interests of their sponsor, as is attested rather clearly in their treatment of the UAE's nation-building project, the regime's efforts in nurturing an engaged and aspirational citizenry, and the Abraham Accords. Like CNAS, CSIS has also laundered policy reforms desired by Abu Dhabi on a number of occasions. This kind of surrogate-led advocacy was especially apparent in the Jon Alterman and Kathleen Hicks-written "Federated Defense in the Middle East", which made the case for seismic defense policy changes that would categorically redound to the benefit of the UAE if implemented.<sup>10</sup>

While there is no hard evidence to suggest an extant financial relationship<sup>11</sup>, finally, the embassy's evident closeness to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy<sup>12</sup> (WINEP) has sufficed to secure it favorable treatment from the think tank. Evidence of this include polemics and policy analyses celebrating the Abraham Accords and stumping for a US-led missile defense "Manhattan Project" to protect Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia against Iran and its proxies. It also includes the production of critical contents targeting Emirati rivals. Outputs of this variety were most recently epitomized by an article probing Qatar's relationship

8 Whether directly commissioned or not, one ought note that [the FDD also produced a series of publications centered upon Qatar's involvement with terrorism financing](#) around the same time that it was paid to stage the aforementioned forum.

9 The UAE's funding of CSIS began after a cynical political attack led by Senator Chuck Schumer amongst others blocked the Dubai-based DP World from purchasing a number of American ports in 2007. [Schumer alleged that American ports might be "infiltrated" by terrorists were Dubai World's purchase to go through.](#)

10 After singling out the contributions that the UAE's Special Operations Forces make to American counter-terrorism efforts, "Federated Defense in the Middle East" argues that the United States, in seeking to lessen its footprint in the region, ought delegate local allies, the UAE very much included, with greater and greater responsibilities over its regional security operations.

11 Emails obtained and released by the hacking group GlobalLeaks did reveal one exchange where Robert Satloff, executive director of WINEP, [thanked the UAE Ambassador "for the generous new year's gift."](#)

12 Since 2018, FARA records show that WINEP has routinely ranked amongst the three think tanks most frequently contacted by the UAE's "foreign agents" (i.e. the lobbyists and public communications consultants paid by the Embassy). UAE Ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba has also sought to place UAE officials at WINEP as visiting fellows. Indirect fruit of this effort, WINEP published a propagandistic piece on the "meaning of Muhammad bin Zayed" penned by Mansour al-Nogaidan, an Abu Dhabi based researcher and former jihadist that is frequently lifted up to testify to the merits of the UAE governing model. Lest further testament to the intimacy of the UAE-WINEP relationship be needed, the same cache of hacked emails referenced previously revealed that it was WINEP executive director Robert Satloff who personally connected [UAE ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba to Uzi Rubin, reputed architect of the Iron Dome missile defense system.](#)

For those unfamiliar with WINEP's institutional history, [Joel Beinin wrote an excellent piece for the Middle East Information and Research Project](#) detailing how the organization emerged out of the American-Israeli Public Action Committee in 1985, and how it was charged with furnishing the intellectual scaffolding that would be used to justify the United States' unconditional support to Israel in a changing domestic and international environment.



with the Muslim Brotherhood, an article published in the immediate aftermath of the Al Ula Statement—a “solidarity and stability” agreement signed by six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council which brought an end to the embargo on Qatar—which Abu Dhabi is known to disagree with.

As it offers insights into how Abu Dhabi leverages access in addition to money in influencing knowledge production in Washington, one should also make note of the relationship that the UAE embassy has developed with WINEP’s Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow Michael Knights. Knights not only has an extensive record of parroting talking points and arguments passed to him by long-time UAE lobbyist Hagir el-Awad; he also authored a series of papers concerning Abu Dhabi’s war in Yemen based on field research conducted while embedded with Emirati troops in the southern theater, an opportunity that had been arranged for him by the Embassy and its local lieutenants in Washington. These works unsurprisingly paint a picture of the conflict that is rather charitable to the parties involved in the organizing of Knights’ data collection process, and that steered away from subjects likely to make those parties uncomfortable—such as the mass torture conducted across a UAE-run prison network or the humanitarian catastrophe that had been precipitated in large part due to Abu Dhabi’s blockades on Yemen’s southern ports.

As this review evinces, for relatively small sums, the UAE has managed to introduce certain frames, arguments, and data points into Washington’s marketplace of ideas, and to at least partially prevent others from entering to no small degree. The production and erasure of discourses and knowledge claims, however, only constitute half of the job for those seeking to influence how government thinks and acts. The second half requires the cleaning, packaging, and distribution of favorable contents; the cordoning off of adverse informational flows before they can reach relevant parties; and the grooming of relevant audiences.

The embassy delegates these downstream operations

to a number of public communications and lobbying firms. In terms of a division of labor, the lobbyists tend to handle the last mile delivery (i.e. the transmission of messaging to political stakeholders), while the public communications consultants—the Harbour Group, Camstoll Group<sup>13</sup>, Finsbury Glover Hering Group, and the Bullpen Strategy Group (formerly Definers Public Affairs), listed in order of relative importance—are charged with directing all that comes before it.

## Managing the Media

The first and most important function entrusted to the communications professionals is to manage the media. Furnishing story background, liaising between the journalist and relevant experts, and rationing access to quotable figures relevant to the news being reported, it should be said, has become appreciably simpler in recent times. This is in large part due to changes in the economics of the print media, where revenue declines have resulted in both increasing market consolidation and the shuttering of foreign bureaus. By dint of these industry-wide shifts, there are now fewer outlets covering the Middle East and North Africa, and more and more of the journalists writing on the region are doing so from offices in Washington and New York, a fact not lost on former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes.<sup>14</sup>

As a vast majority of these parties lack the field experience and language skills needed to access reliable contacts on the ground, for all effects and purposes, they cannot make the news absent the help of external interlocutors, who provide them with the information and interview subjects that are needed to craft a narrative. Given that mainstream press outlets rarely investigate or disclose the financial conflicts of interests that may or may not influence their sources—be they government representatives, public relations men and women, or think tank researchers—one ought also note that readerships are infrequently made aware of the spin they are being exposed to.

13 The Camstoll Group is led by a number of former Treasury officials with deep ties to the [intellectual networks driving contemporary Islamophobia](#) in the United States.

14 Per Rhodes, “All these newspapers used to have foreign bureaus. Now they don’t. They call us to explain to them what’s happening in Moscow and Cairo. Most of the outlets are reporting on world events from Washington. The average reporter we talk to is 27 years old, and their only reporting experience consists of being around political campaigns. That’s a sea change. They literally know nothing.”

As FARA records establish, the Embassy's most trusted communications consultancy, the Harbour Group, has actively taken advantage of these opportunities to influence the press. In April of 2020 alone, Managing Director Richard Mintz reported five different contacts with Yaroslav Trofimov, the chief foreign affairs correspondent of the Wall Street Journal, four of which appear to have been related to food security issues in Yemen. Between May and September, Mintz reported an additional six contacts with journalists from the New York Times, CNN, and Bloomberg. During the same time period, Mintz's associates Matt Schubert reported four contacts with The Hill, including three with the publication's editor-in-chief Steve Clemons; Adam Sharon reported contacts with the Wall Street Journal, CNN, and CNBC; and Matt Triaca reported nine contacts on behalf of the UAE Embassy with ABC News, The Hill, Vanity Fair, Fox News, and NBC News. To the extent that there are few investigative and enforcement mechanisms in place at the Department of Justice to ensure that FARA filings are accurate, it seems reasonable to conclude these recorded contacts represent only a fraction of the Harbour Group's interactions with the media.

Also taking advantage of these opportunities was the Bullpen Strategy Group (BSG). Per FARA filings from this January, between July and December of 2020, the consultancy made thirty-two contacts with the media on behalf of the UAE Embassy, many of which concerned issues to do with UAE-Qatar relations, and many of which were in service of a cynical (and ultimately successful) effort aimed at forcing AJ+, the local subsidiary of Al Jazeera, to register as a foreign agent in the United States. Parties engaged include NBC News, CNN, BuzzFeed News, The Washington Examiner, Mother Jones, The Daily Beast, The Washington Free Beacon, The Huffington Post, The

Bulwark, The Daily Caller, Fox News, The Spectator US, Sinclair Broadcast Group<sup>15</sup>, The New York Times, Business Insider, The Hill, Politico, Vice, USNI News, The Wall Street Journal, Axios, and Inside Defense. In addition, having used a constellation of more sordid practices in advancing client priorities in the past, it cannot be ruled out that BSG's interventions on behalf of the UAE extended well beyond the media outreach just surveyed.

In influencing the public discourse in the United States, Abu Dhabi has also leveraged two auxiliary mechanisms. The first is David Rothkopf. One of the graybeards of the American foreign policy establishment, Rothkopf regularly appears on television media; publishes frequent columns with The Daily Beast, The Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Financial Times; and currently retains a post as a member of the Board of Contributors of USA Today. He does all these things without ever making mention of the \$600,000 that the UAE Embassy annually pays him for advisory services.<sup>16</sup> Given the unique gravity that Rothkopf exerts on mass and elite sentiment and his personal proximity to the Clinton-wing of the Democratic party, his utility to the messaging strategy of Abu Dhabi ought not be diminished.<sup>17</sup>

The second auxiliary mechanism—and the one most responsible for cordoning off of adverse informational flows before they can reach relevant parties—is the cleaning and disinfecting of the internet. This job is primarily handled by Terakeet LLC, a firm the Embassy began employing in March of 2020 for the purpose of “develop(ing) and deploy(ing) (a) search engine optimization strategy including website content with a focus on continental United States-based searches related to the Embassy and its personnel (and) in

15 The Sinclair Broadcasting Group is the largest broadcast company in the United States, [owning and operating 192 television stations nation-wide](#).

16 At the time he entered the contract, Rothkopf was officially still listed as a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace as well. It is also worth noting that Rothkopf rarely to never discloses his relationship with the UAE when making an appearance on television or publishing a column in print. In addition, the reader ought register that while CEO of the FP Group and Editor at Large of the quasi-Think Tank Foreign Policy magazine, Rothkopf secured lucrative Emirati contracts for his firm ([through their arrangement of Peace Games events](#)) and that his wife, Carla Canales, [was paid a considerable sum to consult on the Abu Dhabi “Culture Summit.”](#)

17 In this same general vein, one should note that the UAE Ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba's close personal friendship with Joe Scarborough, co-host of MSNBC's flagship morning program. Though not a lobbying arrangement, this personal relationship is still material to the subjects of our concern, as [Scarborough has personally relayed statements written by the Ambassador via his twitter account](#), and afforded the latter the opportunity to appear on his show four times since 2014. In view of how many Democrats wake up with Morning Joe, the salience of Scarborough's support ought not be diminished.

support of the Embassy's overall web strategy." In broad strokes, search engine optimization involves technical interventions aimed at manipulating web browser algorithms for the purpose of increasing or decreasing the exposure that particular pieces of web-based content are given. When done properly, such manipulations can lead to an Embassy press release, say, coming up as the first item generated by a web search, and to a critical expose being buried on the tenth page of a Google search. The effects on discourse ought be self-evident.

## Last Mile Delivery: Lobbying Capitol Hill and the Executive Branch

Having crafted a construct of the Middle East through its dealings in the think tank and media worlds, the next step for the embassy is to vest its discursive interventions with an explicitly political valence. Again taking advantage of the onset of decadence, it principally does so by stepping into the widening channels that now allow outside actors to inform, advise, and lobby elected officials and policymakers.

While public communications firms are not entirely absent from these efforts<sup>18</sup>, as mentioned, this is a domain managed primarily by the lobbyists under the UAE's employ. The most relevant of the Embassy's agents are those retained by Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld (henceforth Akin Gump). For dealing with the Pentagon and issues related to arms sales, the Embassy also has access to the firm American Defense International.

In terms of activities, in July of 2020, a slow month in Washington traditionally speaking, Akin Gump's lobbyists reported making 167 political contacts on the behalf of the UAE. The majority of these were digital in nature, with email representing the most commonly used mechanism for engaging lawmakers

and administrators on the behalf of their client. As it speaks to how integrated the UAE's operation in DC is, it should be added here that disclosures previously submitted to the Department of Justice by Akin Gump's main UAE-facing lobbyist—the former Director of Political-Military Affairs at the UAE Embassy Hagir El-Awad—show that lobbying emails not infrequently include contents produced through the Embassy's upstream interventions with think tanks and the media.

Those targeted by the firms' lobbying—whether through email or in-person meetings—between July and December of 2020 included the chiefs of staff, policy directors, and legislative assistants for Democratic and Republican elected officials in both houses of congress; senior staffers for House and Senate subcommittees; the Dean of Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies Eliot Cohen; the Director of International Affairs at the American Israel Public Action Committee (AIPAC); Malcolm Hoenlein of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; the leadership of the American Jewish Committee; National Security Council members including Senior Director for Gulf Affairs Brigadier General Miguel Correa; the White House Special Representative for International Negotiations; and Senior White House Advisors from the legislative affairs and policy & strategy branches, amongst many others.

In certain instances, these parties were contacted in reference to matters dealing with UAE investments in a Congressperson's home district. They were more frequently engaged for the purposes of advancing the UAE's agenda when it came to weighty matters concerning bilateral relations, weapons orders<sup>19</sup>, and regional affairs.

Akin Gump has not merely leveraged its capacities for persuasion in seeking to influence Capitol Hill, but its political donations as well.<sup>20</sup> A report published by the Center for International Policy in October 2019 documented that in the aggregate, the UAE's "foreign

18 FARA records show that the Harbour Group is in regular contact with the Young Professionals in Foreign Policy, a feeder type of organization whose network contains many next generation policymakers.

19 In November of 2020, Akin Gump lobbyists made sixty-two political contacts in relation to its pending order of F-35s, weaponized drones, and munitions.

20 As was discussed in the introduction, one should also note that the Abu Dhabi government itself made illegal contributions to the campaigns of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump back in 2016.



agents” made nearly \$600,000 worth of campaign contributions in 2018. FARA filings from this past January, meanwhile, show that Akin Gump and its employees alone made just short of \$300,000 worth of contributions in the second half of 2020. Importantly, the lion’s share of these contributions came from the Akin Gump Political Action Committee. This being the case, the figures represent the outcome of an institutional intervention taken by the firm more than they do a collection of personal giving choices.

Whether payments made by Akin Gump’s Political Action Committee (PAC) constitutes a backdoor facility allowing foreign parties such as the UAE to sneak around existing prohibitions concerning campaign contributions can be debated. In spirit if not in letter, the payments do strike as a potential violation of existing laws and regulations. It is difficult to contest, after all, that the business provided by the Embassy to Akin Gump at least partially finances the latter’s PAC. To the extent that this PAC donates to specific elected officials for the express purpose of advancing the firm’s agenda—an agenda which cannot easily be divorced from the agendas of its clients—that the Embassy’s wishes might inform how the firm’s distributes its material support in the halls of Congress strikes as highly credible as well.<sup>21</sup>

In the eventuality where Capitol Hill shows itself to be impervious to the effects of lobbying and/or indirect allocations of campaign financing, finally, the Embassy still has one more means at its disposal for influencing proceedings: the close relations it maintains with the outside parties called to provide expert testimony to both the House and Senate.

As research conducted by Eli Clifton has established, since 2016, think tank personnel have represented a near majority of the non-governmental witnesses invited to testify before the House Foreign Affairs committee. More than that, Clifton’s work also reveals that employees from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a long-time client of Abu Dhabi, represent the single largest contingent within the

subpopulation of think tank witnesses called before the committee, and that the personnel of three other think tanks sponsored by the UAE Embassy—the Heritage Foundation, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy—are also frequently called to testify. What is more, a 2018 investigation from Lydia Dennett shows the Foreign Affairs committee to be no anomaly in terms of the recruitment of outside counsel: the experts brought before the House’s Armed Services and Appropriations committees exhibit many of the same institutional affiliations. A similar invitation pattern is evinced by the Senate’s Foreign Relations committee, too.

Abu Dhabi of course has no control over how the Chairs of these committees select the outside parties they want to inform members on particular issues. That said, its positioning within Washington’s think tank landscape increases the probability that a friendly voice will be amongst those called to furnish testimony when relevant matters come before Congress. On those occasions where things do work out in this manner, one ought note as well that the individuals receiving the testimony are unlikely to be made aware of the witness’ potential conflicts of interest. The Senate currently has no disclosure rules for outside experts, and though improved, the House’s truth in testimony protocols are still compromised by a number of outstanding problems.<sup>22</sup>

Combined with its communications and official lobbying activities, the Embassy’s direct and indirect actions on Capitol Hill constitute another mechanism for influencing how issues are conceptualized and understood, and, by extension, for influencing how policy is made.

21 Ben Freeman and Ryan Summers’ analysis of the political contributions of lobbyists employed by Saudi Arabia established that in the case of Saudi Arabia at least, lobbyist contributions were frequently timed to coincide with a vote critical to the monarchy’s interests.

22 Mechanisms for ensuring compliance in the disclosure of conflicts of interest are still lacking. A Think Tank’s capacity to shroud the identity of its donors also allows an employee of said Think Tank to escape needing to report a relevant relationship between its employer and a special interest group.

## 2.2 Elite Relationship Management

The conditions introduced by decadence—(i) greater migratory flows between government work and employment with think tanks and/or corporate entities on the part of senior public officials; (ii) the emergence of new industries and career paths for bureaucrats and White House/Congressional staffers looking to commoditize their access and knowledge of the state; (iii) the donor classes' growing gravity within both political parties—create far more opportunities for organizations (and foreign states) to insinuate themselves amongst persons of influence. Whether actively serving in government or not, such persons retain intimate and often informal modes of access to decision-makers. By inculcating their goodwill, external actors can buttress their position within the political classes, and thereby complement the effects introduced through their epistemic and lobbying interventions.

Abu Dhabi, amongst many others, has attempted to seize the opportunities furnished by decadence in order to cultivate relations with Republican and Democratic party insiders of high status. Analytically, the mechanisms through which the emirate has brought social capital-rich Democrats into its orbit can be divided into four categories.

### Service contracting

Whether by design or not, the contracting of services has functioned to vest a diversity of individuals holding longstanding ties to Democratic leadership<sup>23</sup> with a material interest in Abu Dhabi's continued good standing in Washington. Take the communications and strategic consultancies currently on the embassy's books (or the books of

a second state-connected entity).<sup>24</sup> The executive suites of each of the firms in question are filled by parties intimately linked to the Clinton-wing of America's center-left political party.

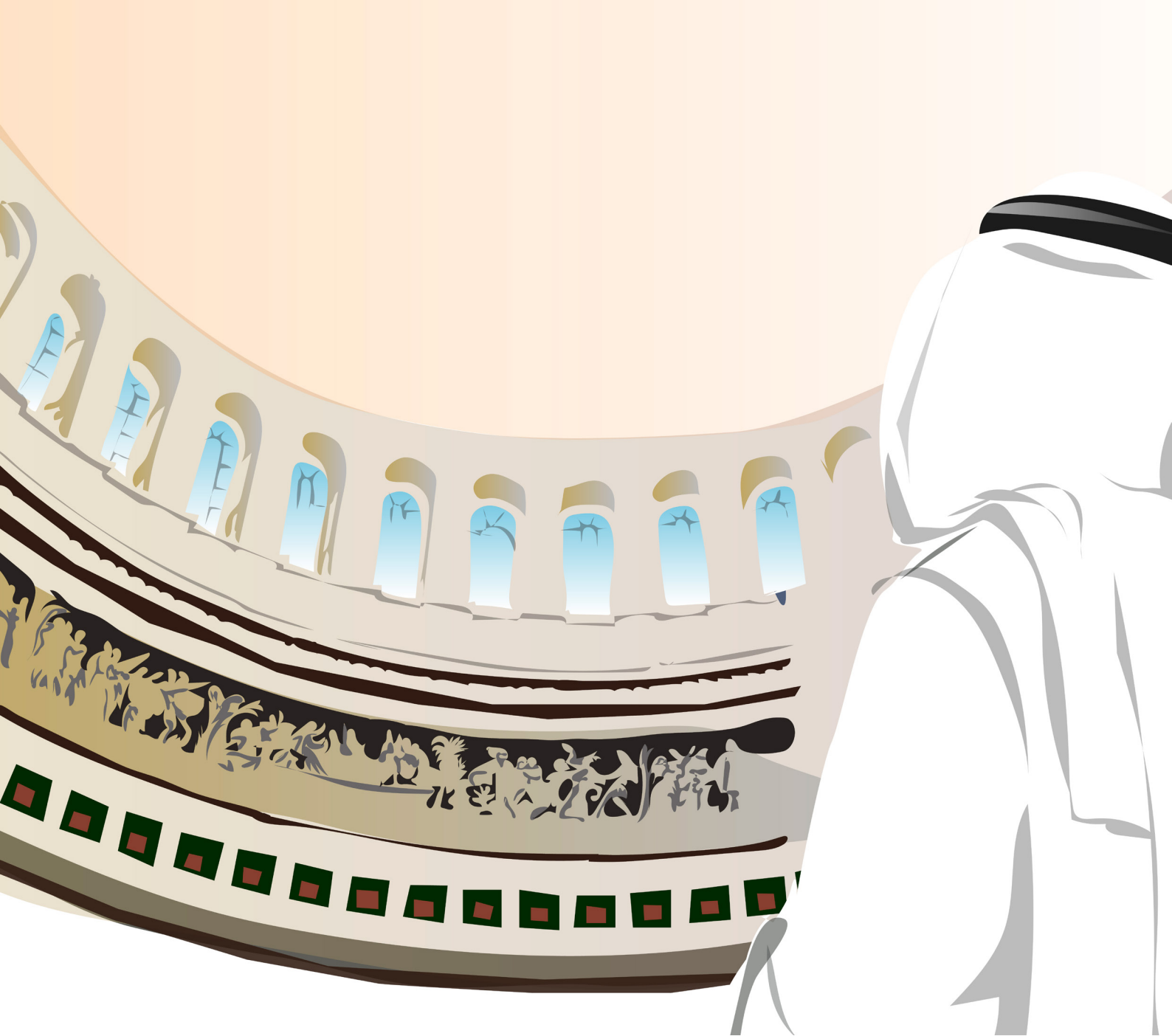
Managing Director of the Harbour Group Richard Mintz, for instance, was a press aide for Clinton's Inaugural Committee and later served as public affairs director for the [President's first Transportation Secretary Federico Pena](#). Since that time, his personal friendships with [former colleagues George Stephanopoulos and Rahm Emanuel](#) have more than endured. The latter, a one-time Senior Policy and Strategy Advisor to President Clinton and former Chief of Staff for President Barack Obama, is considered one of the most influential players within the conservative faction of the party since the 1980s.

Joel Johnson, the Managing Director of Finsbury Glover Hering, also served in the Clinton White House as a Senior Policy and Communications Advisor and as Communications Advisor to John Kerry during his 2004 campaign for the Presidency. While exclusively working in the private sector since, email leaks from the 2016 campaign show that Johnson [remains a trusted confidante and informal consigliere to senior party personnel](#), John Podesta included.

Andrew Franks, founder and President of KARV Communications, was a political appointee to the Clinton White House as well, where he served between 1992 and 1997. Beyond retaining the social network built during those years, as a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, Franks also has an alternative institutional mechanism for accessing the Democratic intelligentsia. David Rothkopf, a FARA registered advisor of Abu Dhabi since 2018,

23 Other strategy and communications firms employed by the embassy grant it access to the Republican party and the Pentagon. The Camstoll Group's leadership—Mathew Epstein, Benjamin Schmidt, Howard Mendelsohn, and Ben Davis—are veterans of either the Bush Treasury or Defense Departments. Bullpen Strategy's leadership, meanwhile, is dominated by Republican political operatives.

24 The embassy's preferred lobbying firm—Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld—may similarly provide a way of accessing the social networks of the Democratic party leadership, too. Recent alumni of the firm, after all, include Democratic rising stars Joaquin and Julian Castro, while current employees and consultants include party graybeards like Al From, and Vic Fazio (and the recently deceased Vernon Jordan). Though none of these individuals appear to lobby on behalf of the UAE, the possibility of their practicing a less formal kind of lobbying cannot be ruled out.



was Clinton's Deputy and (acting) Under Secretary of Commerce for International Trade for the majority of his eight years in office. Like Franks, he is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations as well. Once a mere intern and Deputy Assistant within the White House, finally, Doug Band, one of the founders of Teneo Strategy, would go on to become Bill Clinton's righthand man following the conclusion of the latter's tenure in office. Until very recently at least<sup>25</sup>, Band's access to the inner sanctums of the Democratic party was unsurpassed.

The Embassy's contracting of particular think tanks has also doubled as means of currying favor

amongst high-ranking Democratic apparatchiks. Its aforementioned commissioning of an analysis from the Center for New American Strategy, for instance, not only purchased a publication that could be leveraged to influence policymakers, [but a close personal relationship with Michelle Flournoy](#). Though ultimately passed over for the Secretary of Defense appointment, Flournoy remains one of the most influential voices within the Democratic party when it comes to matters of national security. According to the Revolving Door Project, moreover, at least a dozen of her former employees at CNAS have been [appointed to high-level positions with](#)

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25 Band and the Clintons have recently had a falling out, as is covered in [this Vanity Fair piece](#).

the Biden administration. Though less explicitly transactional, the Embassy's longstanding budget support to the Center for American Progress, one of the leading waystations for Democrats out of power and a primary hub of Clintonite influence, surely also ingratiated it to many persons relevant to the party's workings, none the least of which is Neera Tanden.<sup>26</sup>

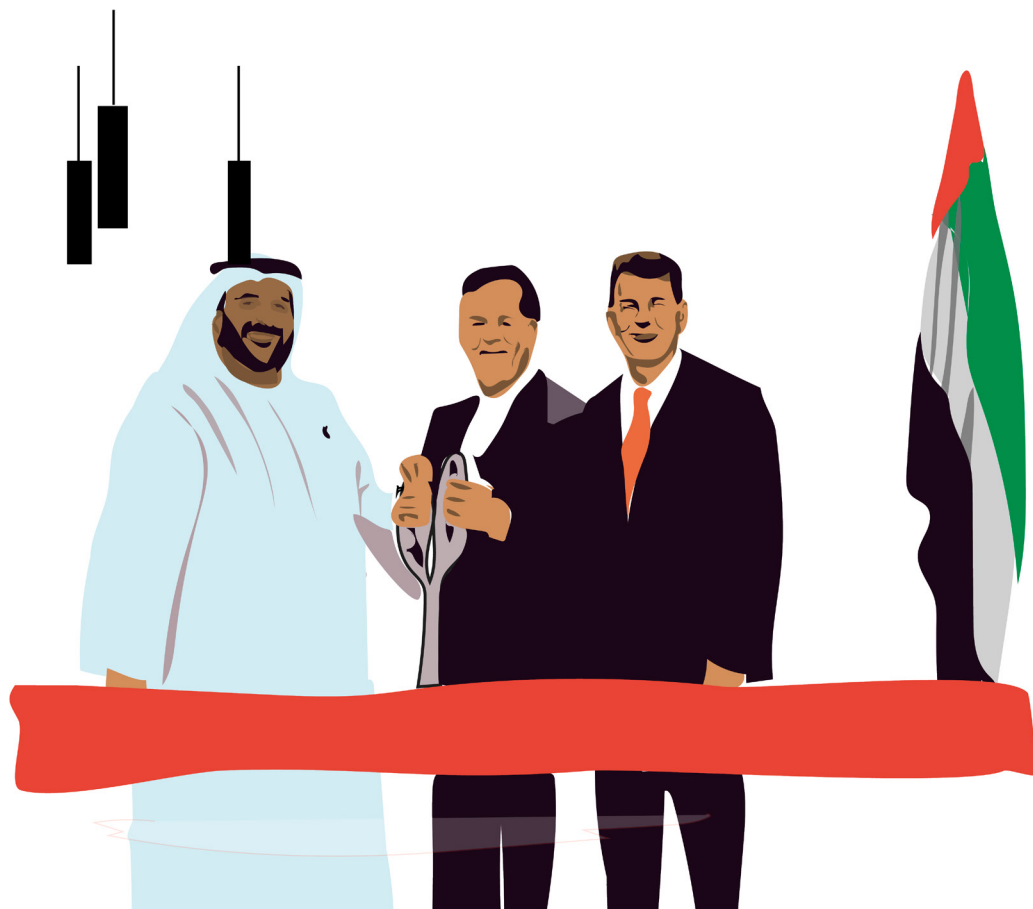
Falling within the category of service contracting would be Abu Dhabi's patronizing of the American arms manufacturing industry. To the extent that these firms operate one of the most expansive lobbying operations in the capital while also providing a retirement home for high-ranking military officers, Abu Dhabi's purchases function not only to protect the country's interests back home, but in Washington as well. One such military officer that is particularly relevant to our concerns is the current Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin. Like his

predecessors Jim Mattis and Mark Esper, Austin too assumed his position after previously working for one of the United States' largest weapons exporters.

As ought be clear, then, at a minimum, the individuals and institutions contracted by Abu Dhabi bear considerable social capital within Democratic circles, and are positioned at no more than one degree of removal from the party politburo. Maximally, the persons currently have a direct hand in the Biden administration's making of policy.

## Investment and business partnerships

The UAE's dealings with Blackrock and the Carlyle Group are the most relevant as pertains to second



<sup>26</sup> Tanden was Biden's original nominee for Director of the Office of Management and Budget. Unlikely to be confirmed due to her combative behavior on social media, she withdrew her nomination in March.

order effects vis-a-vis liberal politics.<sup>27</sup> By dint of hires made, its past advisory roles, and the enormous opportunities afforded it in managing the cleanup of the 2008 financial crisis, Blackrock has been described as operating a “shadow government” for the Democratic party. Consequence of this history of intimacy, the firm’s CEO, Laurence Fink, was one of the Biden administration’s leading candidates for the Treasury Secretary nomination. Though Fink ultimately lost out, three of his senior lieutenants—all of whom had been recruited to Blackrock after first serving in the Obama White House—have been appointed to jobs of great importance by the new President. Brian Deese, once Global Head of Sustainable Development at Blackrock, was named Biden’s Director of the National Economic Council. Wally Adeyemo, Fink’s former Chief of Staff, is soon to be confirmed as Deputy Treasury Secretary. Lastly, Michael Pyle, previously Blackrock’s Chief of Global Investment Strategy, is Vice President Kamala Harris’ top economic advisor.

If less connected in terms of personnel, the Carlyle Group—in whom Mubadala, Abu Dhabi’s second largest sovereign wealth fund, holds a significant equity stake—is itself a deeply political creature and incredibly useful institutional ally. Long reputed as one of the most influential behind-the-scenes actors in Washington, the firm is still guided by Executive Chairman David Rubenstein, an operator of the highest order who, in addition to his post at Carlyle, also serves as the Chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and as the President of the distinguished Economic Club of Washington, DC. Though Rubenstein is no longer flanked by the former Presidents, Prime Ministers, and Defense Secretaries who once populated the Carlyle Group’s offices, his firm remains as formidable as ever when it comes to leveraging its knowledge of the local terrain in order to swing events and persons in a way beneficial to it. Keeping up with the

times, in 2020, Carlyle even moved into the murky world of campaign finance by establishing its own Political Action Committee, from which it funneled considerable campaign contributions to a number of senior Democrats in the House of Representatives, including Richard Neal and Steny Hoyer. The private equity giant’s business dealings in the defense industry has also granted it non-negligible sway at the Pentagon and with the intelligence community since the early 2000s, a hardly inconsequential factoid from the perspective of the UAE Embassy.

Also deserving mention as relates to this mechanism of relationship cultivation are the indirect financial linkages connecting Abu Dhabi to the current Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines. Prior to taking their posts at the White House, Blinken and Haines worked for WestExec Advisors, a defense-focused strategic consultancy firm founded by a collection of ex-Obama White House officials, Blinken included. The company claims it does not accept consultancy contracts from foreign governments. It does, however, extensively work with American arms manufacturers, and is a strategic partner with Pine Island Capital Partners, a private equity firm with sizable holdings in the defense industry.<sup>28</sup> Both of these variables bring the consultancy (and its leadership) into the orbit of Abu Dhabi, which, as discussed in the first chapter of this report, is one of the largest consumers of American weaponry. What is more, with Teneo Strategy’s recent acquisition of a minority stake in the firm, WestExec Advisors is now partially owned by a paid lobbyist of the al-Nahyan regime. To the extent that Blinken and Haines are likely to return to WestExec Advisors upon their departure from government, the firm’s entanglements with the UAE are far from immaterial to our concerns.

27 Pertaining to investment partnerships more generally, it is worth recording that Brett McGurk, National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, serves as an independent Board Director for [Primer](#), a machine intelligence company based in San Francisco that [Mubadala, the second largest of Abu Dhabi’s sovereign wealth funds, is invested in](#).

28 One of the firm’s holdings, InVeris Training Solutions (formerly Meggitt Training Systems) has its regional office in Abu Dhabi, and [does “extensive” business with the regime](#).



## Charitable giving

Discretionary giving has provided a slightly more subtle (though still useful) means of cultivating ties to elite society in the United States, and, by extension, to the Democratic party. The concentric circles between the boards of the institutions that Abu Dhabi's royals tend to give to—children's hospitals, elite private universities, art museums and theaters—and the political donor classes in the United States are, after all, fitted together quite snugly. In this sense, giving affords not only the chance for a photo op to be published in the papers, but an opportunity to cozy up to persons of relevant influence, too.

Nowhere are such dynamics more apparent than in the case of Mohammed bin Zayed's sponsorship of the Special Olympics<sup>29</sup>. Beyond whatever good press the sponsorship may have generated, [the Crown Prince's \\$25 million gift](#) more importantly granted the principal direct access to the Chairman of the organization's board, Timothy Shriver. In addition to many other things, Shriver is scion of the Democratic party's first family, the Kennedy's, and long-time friend of and advisor to Joe Biden.

## Embassy outreach

For the better part of a decade, UAE Ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba has generally been regarded as one of Washington's biggest entertainers and more deft managers of what George Shultz once called "garden diplomacy." Per Ryan Grim of *The Intercept*, "Otaiba's dinner parties are a thing of legend in the Washington social scene, occasionally prepared by Wolfgang Puck himself [one of the United States' most renowned chefs]. The exclusive events are part of the UAE's strategy to buy influence in Washington, by assiduously flattering and pampering the most influential members of the elite."

Though Grim's claims may be subject to overstatement, the ambassador's hobnobbing within the capital has certainly allowed him to build personal relationships with many individuals

of standing inside Democratic politics. Such efforts have been further facilitated, it should be said, ever since Abu Dhabi's movement toward normalization with Israel around in 2012. Now a frequent partner and interlocutor of Haim Saban, one of the Democrat's largest and most consequential donors, al-Otaiba's capacity to access the leaders of the party's dominant center-right faction, and the esteem with which he is held in such quarters, are both considerable.

The social network that Abu Dhabi has built and maintained inside the blue side of Washington was not mapped in order to suggest the existence of a conspiracy. Rather, it was sketched only to demonstrate the degree to which segments of the liberal power elite have become financially entangled with the emirate in recent times. In the final instance, the nodes within this network remain, like the rest of us, free to act their conscience when engaging in politics. That these subjects have a direct stake in Abu Dhabi's well-being, however, would seem to structure their incentives in such a manner as to incline them to act in a manner benefiting the emirate's leadership.

## Conclusion

Abu Dhabi's exploitation of America's onsetting decadence has affected the latter's domestic politics to a non-insignificant degree. While not the only actor playing these games, its shaping of discourses and stewarding of information flows have jointly functioned to exclude certain matters from the realm of public deliberation and to partially set the terms through which those issues that do break through are conceived and contested, particularly when the issue at stake is proximate to the regime's interests. The lobbying of elected officials and cultivation of relationships at the highest ranks of both parties, meanwhile, has allowed Abu Dhabi to impact the conduct of policy at a more intimate and interpersonal level, too.

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29 The organization's board of directors includes, amongst others, a Managing Director of Goldman Sachs, the CEO of Marriott, and the CEO of Coca Cola.

Collectively, these interventions into the ideational and sociological domains of American politics exert an undeniable if perhaps ethereal effect on relevant operations of state. In so doing, they reveal themselves to be of fundamental importance to Abu Dhabi's successes in dodging censure in the United States and to the Democratic party's odd acedia in the face of the emirate's abundant misdeeds. Seen in conjunction with effects introduced through economic entangling, Abu Dhabi's erstwhile strategic utility to the Pentagon, and the signing of the Abraham Accords, the exploitation of decadence detailed in this subsection explains why any reprisals against Abu Dhabi are unlikely to be forthcoming any time soon.

# General Conclusion

History is contingent, nowhere more so than in the domain of international affairs. Formations, alliances, and strategies that look to be endowed with some kind of ontological permanence can and do give way. Structural ties and path dependencies predicting an eternity of sameness can be disrupted by all kinds of things, from popular uprising to market shocks to the volitional acts of grand states(wo)men. This being the case, the possibility of abrupt change and transformation, whether for better or worse, ought never be discounted entirely.

That said, when it comes to the relations of the United States and Abu Dhabi—and the Democratic party's approach to the emirate in particular—the probabilities of rupture are undoubtedly slim. This stems from a configuration of variables, two of which were highlighted in this paper: the al-Nahyan regime's entanglements within the American economy as well as the regime's exploitation of opportunities opened due to the American political system's drift into decadence.

By dint of the former, the material conditions of political deliberation have been set in such a manner as to disincentivize a substantive challenge to the status quo. These conditions, determined by the volume, density, and sectoral location of economic interpenetration, after all, invest the prospect of a political decoupling from Abu Dhabi with profound economic risk. In view of those who stand to lose out in such an eventuality—finance capital, the tech sector, real estate developers, and arms manufacturers—and the influence those parties can bring to bear in the political sphere, interpenetration may not only affect policy choice at the structural level, but in more discretionary ways too.

The exploitation of decadence has functioned to shift the ideational, institutional, and microsociological landscape of American bureaucrats and elected officials in a manner conducive to US-Abu Dhabi bonhomie as well. On

the one hand, the regime and its many surrogates in Washington has been afforded the chance to mold discourses around particular issues and to curate many of the informational flows that ultimately reach the policy community. On the other, Abu Dhabi has been allowed to cultivate close relations with much of the contemporary power elite, senior Democrats included. Together, these interventions further increase the likelihood that current and future stewards of the American state will seek to avoid rocking the boat when it comes to issues proximate to the UAE's interests.

Localized revisions to the United States' approach to Abu Dhabi may still come to pass in the next few years. Such revisions may even prove genuinely meaningful to the lives of people in the Middle East and North Africa, especially if they lead to Muhammad bin Zayed scaling back the adventurism that has reeked such havoc since 2011. In the aftermath of the UAE's Ambassador's alleged abuse of Congressman Ro Khanna, it strikes as possible if not plausible that the Congressional Progressive Caucus and their allies in the Senate may also make Capitol Hill less welcoming than normal for Abu Dhabi in the days to come.

Absent the sinews of capital being swiftly disentangled or the American political system's drift into decadence being reversed, however, any revisiting of the two states' relationship at a more fundamental level does not look to be in the cards. Those hoping a countervailing wind might soon issue forth from Washington to push Abu Dhabi back from its front-footed position in its region may face a long time waiting.





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