

THE TWO-TIER SYSTEM OF EMIRATI INTELLIGENCE: INNOVATING WEAKNESS INTO RUTHLESS STRENGTH

Matthew Crosston (PhD)

(Senior Advisor in the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS), Vice Chairman at Modern-Diplomacy and Editor-in-Chief of the Global South policy initiative, the Journal of Rising Powers).

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It is not always so easy to give a quick, concise, and analytically explicit overview of the intelligence community and culture in the United Arab Emirates. Emirati intelligence has to be seen in two disparate tiers: actual domestically-founded and home-grown intelligence efforts, which usually revolve within the small policing and military forces of the UAE; and more elaborate, highly-secretive, outsourced activities that usually see the Emirates in either a facilitating conduit or go-between role with a clear advantage to Emirati interests being eventually made apparent.

The first tier is relatively modest, far less interesting, and somewhat easy to describe: each emirate within the country has its own police force that takes responsibility to gather and act upon any intelligence it can produce related to domestic interests, usually encompassing security, crime, and drug trafficking. The police forces of the two main cosmopolitan areas, Dubai and Abu Dhabi, each have their own departments to then investigate, arrest, and prosecute transgressors. Some of those departments include the General Department of Investigation in Dubai and the Department of Security Affairs of the Abu Dhabi Police. The capitol police in Abu Dhabi prides itself on ultra-modern intelligence capabilities that cooperate with other international organizations, countries, and policing agencies, especially along the issues of counterterrorism and counternarcotics. In addition, the Emirati leadership has taken initiatives recently to create a domestic level of intelligence scholarship and professionalization, namely in the form of the National Defense College in Abu Dhabi, founded in 2013.¹ This institution is a bold step in the Emirates aiming to take a long-term strategic approach to its intelligence

interests that will be less dependent on private companies and allied governments. But those long-term aims are still just that: long-term and far from being fully developed and realized. Which leaves the aforementioned Tier Two to discuss and explore. As will be seen, this tier not only dominates contemporary Emirati intelligence maneuvers, it is purposely hidden in shadow and constantly made vague and ambiguous by Emirati leadership. Unsure at the moment of being able to accomplish its intelligence goals in a more overt and transparent fashion, Tier Two often involves plots worthy of Hollywood.

The first aspect of Tier Two Emirati intelligence involves the simple outsourcing of performance to private companies. This is best exemplified by the recent agreement announced at the end of February with the Harris Corporation of Melbourne, FL, USA, in which a \$189 million USD two-year contract was granted to provide and integrate a battle management system (BMS) to the UAE Armed Forces.² The BMS system de facto means Harris will be responsible in the UAE for initial operational capabilities as the country tries to realize advanced contemporary battlefield management solutions. The contract's issuing authority was the Emirates Command & Control Land Tactical System program, which is a C4ISR program in the UAE that strives to integrate, coordinate, and maximize the combined efficiency of the UAE Armed Forces. These types of agreements are very much a foundation for the actual realization and enactment of Emirati intelligence capabilities, in that they rely on the expertise and technological materiel of professional corporations (almost never Emirati themselves) that can provide the services and manpower skills that are still too thin within the UAE. It is indeed a basic 'dollar for defense' purchasing scheme. This strategy provides the nuts and bolts of Tier One Emirati intelligence while simultaneously creating an intelligence dependency that works at cross-purposes with the institutional mission of the aforementioned National Defense College. Only time will reveal if the UAE can reconcile this intelligence contradiction.

The second aspect of Tier Two Emirati intelligence is intensely strategic, deeply covert, and blatantly Machiavellian. An emerging story only now coming to light in the West, that will undoubtedly have very long media legs and possibly dangerous political consequences, is a perfect example of this second aspect. There are at the moment new investigations into a proposed 'secret meeting' between the Trump and Putin teams in the Seychelles roughly two weeks before the inauguration of Donald Trump. More controversial in the report is that the facilitator of these discussions was the original founder of Blackwater, Erik Prince. Less emphasized but more important was that the UAE was the country truly responsible for facilitating this meeting.³ The story has the potential of blowing up all over the United States, as the country remains enthralled by the supposed connections of the Trump administration to Russia and possible interference of the Russians in the 2016 American presidential election. It is a worthy story to follow for this purpose but that is not the function of the story in this analysis. Its true importance is how much it reveals the preferred intelligence culture of the UAE in the modern day: largely covert back-door deals epitomized by the strategic triangulation of major players to bring about movement on Emirati intelligence interests.

In this case, those hidden triangulated strategic intelligence interests actually involve the UAE's animosity toward Iran and its priority to hinder and constrain any encroaching success by Iran to

project power. In essence, the UAE was interested in brokering this deal as a pathway to convince Russia to limit and pull back from its partnership engagement with Iran, including their apparent joint interests intervening in Syria. This would push back against what the UAE perceives to be Iran's inappropriate claims on regional hegemony across the Middle East. The problem, of course, was that the UAE was self-aware enough of its own intelligence weakness: it knew it did not have the capability to offer Russia anything of relevance on its own that could achieve the larger intelligence goal. However, triangulating between Russia and the United States, helping Russia to establish back-door channels to the incoming American presidential team, does do this: since America also shares the Emirati intelligence goals of undermining Iranian power, separating Russia from Iran, and constraining Russian-Iranian maneuvers in Syria, those shared interests – facilitated through this supposed UAE-brokered Seychelles meeting – might be more easily achieved if the incoming American presidential team offered caveats to Russian interests (namely, the severe reduction if not elimination of Western sanctions against Russia for events in Crimea and Ukraine). This is how REAL Emirati intelligence works: a rare example of self-awareness on the part of the state powering more innovative, if also covert and semi-legal, strategic intelligence initiatives through its maximized relationship networks. In essence, substituting the lack of real military and intelligence power with soft power connections.

So as this story continues to emerge in the West and is dissected ONLY for its potential value in exploding apart the Trump presidency, it should truly be valued for the unique and secret insight it gives to the intelligence culture and strategic initiatives of the United Arab Emirates. It may be a state with limited intelligence capabilities in the traditional understanding of the contemporary era, but it is also an extremely creative innovator, transforming materiel and personnel shortcomings through a maximization of relationship networks, to achieve national security and intelligence interests with a ruthlessly efficient Machiavellian pragmatism.

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³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/blackwater-founder-held-secret-seychelles-meeting-to-establish-trump-putin-back-channel/2017/04/03/95908a08-1648-11e7-ada0-1489b735b3a3_story.html?utm_term=.8bfbdabc92e8