



By: Nawaf Obaid

What does the military imbalance mean for relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE?



For years, Arab and Middle Eastern politics rested on the comfortable assumption that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were locked into a **permanent strategic alignment**—competitive at the margins but ultimately restrained by shared interests.

That assumption is now dangerously outdated. What has changed is not intent but capability—and more importantly, the widening **structural gap** between the two states.

If Abu Dhabi continues to undermine Riyadh's core stabilisation projects in Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and Libya, it risks drifting into a confrontation it cannot sustain and cannot win.

This is not a political argument. It is a military one.

The most persistent misconception surrounding a hypothetical Saudi-UAE confrontation is the belief that it would resemble a brief air exchange or a symbolic clash designed for signalling rather than consequence. It would not.

Any serious confrontation would unfold as a system-level contest, determined by endurance, command coherence, and the ability to keep national military systems functioning under sustained pressure.

On those terms, the balance is decisively asymmetric. Saudi Arabia is a continental-scale military power. The UAE is not.

Structural mismatch

The UAE's defence posture is built around a compact, technologically dense coastal system—effectively a three-city metropolitan arc comprising Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Sharjah.

This arc concentrates political authority, economic output, ports, airports, energy infrastructure, and national command nodes into a narrow geographic space.

The UAE does not defend borders; it defends continuity

The desert interior provides room but not depth. National survival is therefore systemic rather than territorial. The UAE does not defend borders; it defends continuity.

That model performs well against limited or episodic threats. It performs poorly against sustained, multi-domain pressure applied by a much larger neighbour with geographic depth, manpower reserves, and redundancy.

Airpower: scale versus density

The Emirati Air Force is very advanced but finite. Its combat fleet consists of 78 F-16E/F Block 60 aircraft—the only true 4.5-generation fighters in Emirati service—supported by approximately 59 Mirage 2000-9 aircraft, which, despite upgrades, remain legacy 4.0-generation platforms.

The Mirage fleet contributes marginally in a high-intensity contest against a peer air force and would not materially alter the balance against Saudi Arabia.

This air arm is supported by a small number of AEW&C platforms, aerial refuelers, and a sophisticated layered air and missile defence architectures (THAAD and Patriot).

The Royal Saudi Air Force is built not for a short clash but for sustained operational pressure

That structure is designed to deny easy access, preserve command continuity, and impose early friction. It is not designed to generate or sustain air dominance over weeks against a vastly larger force.

The Royal Saudi Air Force fields more than 220 modern 4.5-generation combat aircraft, including approximately 71 Eurofighter Typhoons and around 154 advanced F-15

variants (SA/SR), backed by legacy 4.0 fleets—roughly 70 F-15C/D and 80 Tornado IDS aircraft—that remain fully usable for strike, interdiction, and tempo-sustaining missions.

Supported by multiple AEW platforms, tankers, and a mature C5ISR architecture, this force is built not for a short clash but for sustained operational pressure.

The decisive difference is not who wins the first week. It is who is still flying coherently in the fourth.

Where the gap becomes unavoidable

On land, the disparity widens dramatically.

The UAE army fields 8–10 manoeuvre brigades, supported by roughly 40,000–45,000 total active troops.

These forces are well trained and well equipped, sufficient to defend decisive terrain—ports, airbases, urban centres—but insufficient to absorb prolonged multi-axis pressure without rapid exhaustion.

Saudi Arabia fields over 50 brigades across the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) and the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG), with a combined active manpower of approximately 300,000–325,000 troops.

The UAE operates around 390 Leclerc main battle tanks and roughly 1,600 armoured vehicles and IFVs/APCs in total

This depth allows Riyadh to commit 15–20 brigades to sustained operations while retaining reserves for rotation, other regional stabilisation fronts, internal security, and escalation control.

In armoured strength, the imbalance is just as stark. Saudi Arabia operates approximately 1,150 main battle tanks (primarily M1A2S

Abrams), alongside more than 5,000 infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers when RSLF and SANG inventories are combined.

The UAE operates around 390 Leclerc main battle tanks and roughly 1,600 armoured vehicles and IFVs/APCs in total.

This is not just about quality. It is about mass, replacement, and endurance.

Maritime and strategic forces

At sea, the pattern repeats. The UAE Navy is optimised for littoral defence and offshore energy protection, centred on a small number of modern corvettes and patrol combatants.

It can impose friction. It cannot sustain prolonged sea control.

The Royal Saudi Land Forces operates a larger surface fleet across two maritime theatres (Red Sea and Gulf), supported by greater logistics depth and naval aviation, enabling sustained presence rather than episodic denial.

Strategically, the asymmetry becomes absolute. Saudi Arabia possesses an established and fast-developing strategic missile force command—a capability the UAE does not possess at all—adding an additional layer of deterrence and escalation dominance that cannot be offset by technology alone.

Yemen was the warning shot

This is not theoretical. It is exactly what played out in Yemen.

The UAE's strategy there was not merely flawed; it was profoundly miscalculated.

Abu Dhabi acted on the assumption that technological edge, special forces reach, and proxy leverage could offset the reality of confronting a far larger and more powerful

neighbour.

Once the Kingdom applied a mature C5ISR-driven command-and-control framework, that illusion collapsed.

The neutralisation of Rayyan military base—the Emirati command-and-control node—triggered a cascading failure. An evacuation order followed under the credible threat of devastating strikes.

Saudi-trained Yemeni forces, fused into Saudi C5ISR architecture, rolled through southern Yemen in less than 72 hours.

UAE-backed formations melted away. The outcome was decisive and unambiguous.

Sabotaging Saudi stabilisation efforts in **Yemen** was not clever hedging. It was strategic overreach—and Yemen demonstrated the consequences in full view.

There is a paradox here that Abu Dhabi itself should reflect on. The UAE has earned the nickname “the Little Sparta,” and it is not a hollow one.

Yemen already revealed the limits of Emirati power when confronted by a much larger neighbour applying scale, depth, and endurance

Its forces fought exceptionally against the Houthis, deployed with discipline, and demonstrated tactical innovation well beyond what its size would suggest.

That record deserves recognition and should not be dismissed. But history embeds a warning inside that same analogy.

Sparta won the Peloponnesian War against Athens decisively at Aegospotami in 405 BCE, yet that victory sowed the seeds of its own destruction.

Prolonged war exhausted Spartan manpower, distorted its political system, and forced

reliance on an external power.

Within a generation, the myth of Spartan invincibility collapsed entirely at the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BCE, where a smaller but better-organised Theban force shattered the Spartan army and ended its hegemony forever. The lesson is not about battlefield skill; it is about strategic limits.

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Repeating that miscalculation—this time directly against Saudi Arabia—would not end in tactical embarrassment but in strategic humiliation on a far grander scale.

If similar behaviour continues in Sudan, Somalia, Libya, or even in Syria, the logic will repeat. And if it continues unabated, that logic will eventually return—not to the periphery, but directly to Abu Dhabi itself. Not by choice, but by mechanics.

The meaning of the warning

This is why the recent warning broadcast on Saudi state television matters. It was not rhetorical. It was strategic signalling. The message was explicit: continued disruptive actions will carry a heavy price.



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The Kingdom is clearly not seeking

confrontation. But it is now fully capable of imposing costs that cannot be absorbed or offset.

The UAE has built a formidable military for its size. It has leveraged integration and technology with real skill. But it is not a continental power.

It cannot sustain a prolonged, multi-domain confrontation against Saudi Arabia without external intervention—and none will be coming.

The paradox facing Abu Dhabi is that its greatest strengths—centralisation, efficiency, technological density—become liabilities in a system-level conflict. Saudi Arabia's advantage is not brilliance. It is endurance.

And endurance decides wars.

Dr Nawaf Obaid is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of War Studies, King's College London.