

Emiratis apply foreign policy conditionality on the West rather than the other way around

The EU foreign security narrative often evokes the term “conditionality,” meaning adherence to certain values and norms in exchange for engagement. However, Italy has found that it is the Emiratis that are now applying conditionality on EU and NATO member states. The case of Italy is instructive.

[Following an arms embargo](#) that Italy imposed on the UAE, the Emiratis responded by evicting Italian aircraft and personnel from a key military base, disrupting their presence in the Middle East. [The Emiratis demanded](#) the Italian withdrawal from the Al Minhad airbase, which hosts western military aircraft operating in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, and the Indian Ocean. The last Italian military aircraft left during the first week of July and political-military relations between both countries have continued to deteriorate.

It is significant to note that Al Minhad is an Emirati base which, since the early 2000s, grants permission (or not) to foreign airforces to use the facilities. The facility has been crucial for operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East and now hosts aircraft from Australia, Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the UK and, until recently, Italy.

The Italian air force was kicked off in July, triggering a diplomatic crisis. Wary of escalating tensions, Italian diplomats moved to appease Abu Dhabi, not least by [partially lifting the embargo](#), much to the detriment of Rome’s prestige in the region. Italy has traditionally strong interests in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa and its relative weight is now perceptibly diminished.

Eye for an eye politics

Italy refused to deliver on a 2016 order of 20,000 missiles worth more than 400 million euros, a deal negotiated by Matteo Renzi’s center-left government. Last month the Emiratis moved to block Italian access to the Airbase in direct response to this decision, [according to the Italian public news agency ANSA](#). As a result, the Italian foreign ministry summoned the Emirati Ambassador to Rome, Omar Al Shamsi, for consultations. (I would push this further up as it’s related to the first section/alternatively add context)

This ongoing dispute creates an additional headache for Italy’s evacuation efforts in Afghanistan. Italy is looking for an alternative in the region, although Italy appears to be conforming to Emirati demands (conforming in what way?).

The UAE is part of a military coalition led by Riyadh that has been battling the Iran-backed Houthi movement in Yemen since March 2015. The conflict has caused tens of thousands of civilian casualties and pushed millions more to the brink of famine. Despite announcing in 2019 it had ended its military involvement in Yemen, reports suggest the UAE retains [deep strategic influence](#) in the conflict.

Is it all about business?

The rift also complicates the fate of Italian businesses operating in the Gulf, in which the UAE and especially Dubai is a key hub. Italian media have reported [that Italian companies are worried](#) they would lose civilian contracts in this lucrative market as a result of the dispute.

It should be noted, however, that the arms embargo was announced by the previous Italian government, led by former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. That government's foreign minister was Luigi Di Maio, the former leader of the anti-establishment Five Star Movement. In announcing the embargo, Di Maio called it a "clear message of peace sent by our country," adding that "respect for human rights is a mandatory commitment for us." Conte's government was by Mario Draghi's cabinet (not clear what this means?), but Di Maio maintained hold of his portfolio.

A powerhouse that does not allow maneuvers

UAE has proved several times in the past that any diplomatic issue that might occur will be met with a swift and robust response.

In 2017 [the Washinton Post](#) unvelied an Emirati hacking campaign on Qatari government sites and social media platforms, in which Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad al-Thani, was falsey quoted praising Hamas and calling Iran an "Islamic power."

According to a 2020 article published by [the International Consortium for Investigative Journalists](#), the UAE was placed under a year-long observation by the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force (FATF). In its assement of the country, FATF raised concerns over money laundering, terrorism financing and loopholes in the property and precious metals industries.

Still, most EU financial institutions maintain a prominent presence in the Gulf state, including [Deutsche Bank](#). The only country that has managed to withstand Emirati diplomatic pressure is Norway. Once an arms supplier and ally, Norway [suspended exports](#) of munitions and arms to the UAE over concerns they could be used in the war in Yemem. Furthermore, Oslo has attempted to influence other Nordic countries to follow suit. However, many, including Sweden, are hesistant given their considerable interests in the country.