

## **COMMENTARY**

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### **UAE Embarks on Global Campaign to Market its Brand of Autocracy**

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**T**he United Arab Emirates has embarked on an all-out effort to broaden its regional influence and achieve global acceptance of its autocratic definition of terrorism that encompasses all non-violent, legitimate expressions of political Islam.

The effort competes head on with Qatar's pro-Islamist approach to soft power. It involves participation in the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State, an aggressive media strategy that included attempting to discredit Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup, the use of a network of allegedly UAE-funded NGOs, a religious council to counter to promote a quietist interpretation of Islam, and a failed effort to mediate an end to Yemen's political crisis in part with the help of a former president of the Yemeni Football Association.

A controversial, reportedly UAE-backed NGO, the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), in the latest building block of the Emirati campaign, is organizing an anti-terrorism conference in Geneva next week to discuss a proposed International Convention on Balancing Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights.

The GNRD's past record on human rights issues suggests that the conference's definition of human rights and terrorism will stroke with that of the UAE, which has been repeatedly criticized by human rights organizations and the US State Department.

GNRD last year published a human rights index that ranked the UAE at number 14 in the world and Qatar at 97. Heavy criticism of the index persuaded the group to delete the index from its website. The UAE furthermore last year published a list of banned terrorist organizations that sparked surprise and criticism because it included groups in the United States and Europe that are legal.

Founded in 2008, GNRD is headed by Loai Mohammed Deeb, a reportedly Palestinian-born international lawyer who owns a UAE-based consultancy, and reportedly operated a fake university in Scandinavia, according to veteran Middle East author and journalist Brian Whitaker who has taken a lead in investigative reporting of GNRD.

The group is funded by anonymous donors to the tune of €3.5 million a year, much of which is believed to come from the UAE. GNRD says it aims to “to enhance and support both human rights and development by adopting new strategies and policies for real change.”

Qatar last year briefly detained two GNRD investigators who were in the Gulf state to investigate the working and living conditions of migrant workers. Qatar has been under severe pressure to reform its controversial labour system that puts employees at the mercy of their employers.

A FIFA executive committee warned recently that Qatar could lose its 2022 World Cup hosting rights if it failed to move forward with promised labour reforms. The World Cup is part of a multi-pronged Qatari soft power strategy that includes support for Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood that the UAE views as an existential threat.

Alongside the GNRD, the UAE last year backed the establishment of the Muslim Council of Elders (MCE) that promotes a Sunni Muslim tradition of obedience to the ruler to counter Doha-based Qaradawi's International Union of Muslim Scholars. Qaradawi is a former Muslim Brother leader who fled Egypt in the 1960s and is one of the Muslim world's most prominent clerics and an opponent of Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi.

Whitaker noted that the GNRD has consistently praised the UAE's controversial human rights records with articles on its website on the role of women, the UAE's "achievements in promoting and protecting the family, environmental efforts, care for the disabled and its protection of the rights of children.

The GNRD was recently appointed one of five foreign groups authorized to monitor next month's parliamentary elections in Egypt whose autocratic regime is co-funded by the UAE. Al Sisi was elected after he toppled Egypt's first and only democratically elected president in a military coup. The election occurred in an atmosphere in which more than 1,000 Muslim Brotherhood supporters of Morsi were killed by security forces, thousands more were incarcerated and repression limited expression of dissenting opinions and independent media coverage.

The GRND monitored the election as part of a joint mission. It endorsed the election saying that "the Egyptian people have experienced a unique process toward democratic transition, and despite the fact that minor errors and inaccuracies occurred, these do not shed a negative light on the overall results of the electoral process." The GNRD said that it “was honoured to be a part of the 2014 Egyptian Presidential Election and contribute to promoting its transparency, integrity,

and success” and that it commended Egypt’s achievements thus far towards a path to democracy.”

The GNRD is likely to promote the UAE’s agenda at its Geneva conference by calling for the establishment of an international committee that would “identify the parties responsible for human rights violations and terrorist activity and agree internationally on common ‘black’ and ‘white’ lists of organizations and individuals” in a bid to “ensure common position over the labelling of suspected terrorists and terrorist organizations, adequate and legitimate treatment of such individuals and prevent international tensions and conflicts that result from differences in listing terrorists and terrorist organizations.”

In effect, cloaked in the language of concern for striking a balance between counterterrorism and protection of human rights the committee would seek to bury deep-seated international differences over what constitutes terrorism reflected in the list of groups banned by the UAE and in a world in which countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have either criminalized or sought to limit expressions of atheism; charged women in anti-terrorist courts with violating a ban on driving as is the case in Saudi Arabia; or like in Egypt and Turkey sought to outlaw as terrorist organizations militant soccer fan groups that are in the forefront of the struggle for basic rights.

The Geneva conference follows a failed effort in November to resolve Yemen’s fast deteriorating political crisis by bringing together Yemeni political figures at a conference in Brussels. The conference was co-organized by Yemen's National Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (NCHRDD) headed by Ahmed Saleh al-Essi, a controversial businessman and former head of the Yemeni Football Association.

A journalist for Yemen’s state-owned Saba News Agency told the Yemen Times that the conference had “contributed nothing to the Yemeni reconciliation process” and was “aimed at diverting attention away from achieving justice, removing armed men from the streets, and forming a new government.”

**Note:** This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author’s permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/02/uae-embarks-on-global-campaign-to.html>

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