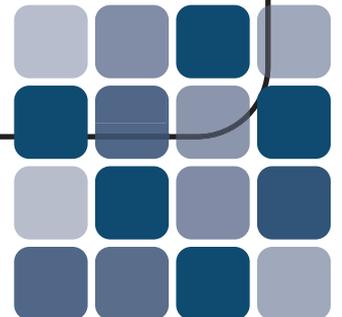


THE MANIPULATION OF TOLERANCE RHETORIC IN THE CONTEXT OF THE UAE



2019
YEAR OF TOLERANCE

GÖKHAN ERELİ





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Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Adress : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA

Phone: +90 850 888 15 20 Faks: +90 (312) 430 39 48

Email: orsam@orsam.org.tr

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About the Author

Gökhan Ereli

Gökhan Ereli was born in Ankara in 1992. He graduated from Kırıkkale University, International Relations department with the highest CGPA in his graduating class. Upon graduating, he enrolled in Middle East Technical University (METU) International Relations Master's with thesis program in 2015. He earned his Master's degree with the thesis "The Impact of American Exceptionalism on U.S. Foreign Policy". Currently, he continues his studies at Middle East Technical University (METU), International Relations Ph.D. program. Also, he is working as a research assistant within the body of ORSAM, Gulf Studies. While his main area of interest is the Gulf region and American foreign policy, his special area of interest is the foreign policies of the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. He speaks advanced English and simple Arabic.

September 2019

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Introduction

This report seeks to analyze religious intolerance in the contemporary United Arab Emirates (UAE). Religious intolerance is part of the broader concept of tolerance. It means that the wider literature from which this paper has drawn is that of “tolerance.”¹ The core argument of this article is that the contemporary UAE authorities have maintained that the UAE is a tolerant country.² However, practices of religious tolerance in the UAE have demonstrated that this claim is inaccurate. The practices covered in this article have included governmental applications of the of religious intolerance, discouraging freedom of worship, and restrictions on freedom of religion. The core argument that the UAE lacks religious tolerance is explained in three stages in this article.

In the first stage, this article examines the internationally recognized definitions of the broader concept of tolerance. Since tolerance is not a concept that must be exclusively associated with religion *per se*, the broader concept of tolerance ought to be addressed comprehensively so that the comprehension of religious tolerance could be both sustained and enhanced. Embodying a universal outlook since its founding in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has defined what tolerance ought to signify. The decision to affiliate the international definition of tolerance with that of the UN’s definition is illuminated in the related section.

Further in the first stage, along with the internationally recognized definition of the UN, this article will provide the reader with the definition of tolerance by the UAE authorities, which is more rooted in a sense of obligation and prolongation of the legacy of the Founding Father of the UAE, Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan. The differences and similarities between the internationally recognized definition and the UAE’s definition are to be underlined, too.

In the second stage, the article will focus on the institutionalization of tolerance rhetoric by

the UAE authorities by means of establishing a Ministry of Tolerance,³ convening related conferences, being a party to regional and international declarations on tolerance and holding other events helping the authorities to institutionalize tolerance rhetoric. As will be seen, it is necessary to underline this because the UAE is home to people from more than two hundred nationalities and is home to people adhering to an ever-increasing number of religions, it seems reasonable that the concept of tolerance has been expanded by attaching it to religious cores and roots which are taken to be the fundamental bases of tolerance itself.⁴

In the third stage, which is entitled, the manipulation of institutionalization, the article will pursue further consolidation of its core argument, whose primary aim is to demonstrate that there are two dimensional reasons for the claim that the UAE is religiously intolerant as opposed to what its authorities have been maintaining.

Within this context, the first reason is the *domestic mistreatment of religious communities* in the country. By domestic mistreatment of religious communities, no particular religious community is taken to be analyzed as if it was excluded from practicing its religion. Rather, religious communities other than the Sunni community might have experienced, to some degree, religious intolerance. That will be covered in the related section in depth. The experiences of intolerance might vary from being jailed⁵ for religious reasons to cutting back on financial assets of certain religious communities.

The second reason is that, while the UAE claims to be tolerant and is an Islamic country whose constitution designates the state religion as Islam⁶ and even makes use of Sharia law for criminal code⁷ and some other codes, *anti-Islamism is the main driver of the UAE foreign policy*.⁸ It is not hard to spot the contradiction laying here.

Talking about the two reasons in depth is better in expressing the core argument in advance. It is essential to concur that the domestic mistreatment of religious communities in the UAE is not easily noticeable, but it can be discerned in certain cases. Incidentally, the concerned religious communities, in this article, are not limited to the ones that are in the conventional dichotomy between the Muslim communities and the Christian communities. In a world where an ever-increasing number of people having many different nationalities and belonging to many religions are able to live in the same places, still adhering to the age-old Muslim – Christian dichotomy for spotting religious intolerance would appear to be ineffective for the purposes of this research.

The dichotomy remains critical; however, what I want to emphasize is that it does not have to be the only case. This argument suggests that the UAE government has somewhat different governmental applications in favor of the Sunni community and to the detriment of the Shia community in the country.⁹ This means that the instances of mistreatment involving the Shia community are of utmost significance for this paper. Extensive accounts are to be covered in the pertaining section.

It would not be an overemphasis if it is stated that the anti-Islamist counter-measures are at the heart of the UAE foreign policy.¹⁰ Pursuing an anti-Islamist foreign policy, in other words, cracking down on what it considers the “Islamist movements” regionally and globally, is not an endeavor for which the UAE claims responsibility.¹¹ The reason why the UAE has enunciated that it is not responsible for pursuing this policy is the so-called association of countering extremism and struggle against radicalization with being anti-Islamism.¹² Coming back to the inherent relation between tolerance rhetoric and UAE foreign policy, the idea is that while the UAE has more than once proclaimed to be tolerant, how could being against “Islamist movements” be evaluated as being tolerant?

Without delving deeper into foreign policy issues, that fact alone ought to demonstrate that pursuing an anti-Islamist foreign policy and associating Islam with fundamentalism and extremism is a rigid representation of intolerance. To be sure, this report does not, in any way, judge the foreign policy choices of any country. However, it does deal with how religious tolerance, which came to be placed in a broader concept of tolerance, has been exploited for political gains. Nor has this paper any intention to “justify” any ideological movement or so-called Islamist movements. Within this unfaltering background, it needs to be pointed out that the foreign policy of the UAE is only taken into consideration, in this report, for its emphasis on being against Islamist movements. Needless to say, analyzing only the foreign policy of the UAE is both beyond the reach of this paper and would be somewhat irrelevant to the research question.

As a conclusion, analyzing religious tolerance rhetoric in the UAE requires one to be aware of specific details. However basic they may seem; it is of critical importance to make sense of them. In this sense, it needs to be acknowledged that the UAE is a federal state, composed of seven emirates each having a different ruler (Sheikh). Just as the UAE is not a unitary state, all of the emirates have different traits. It needs to be noted that politically, economically and socially, the capital Abu Dhabi and economic hub Dubai are the most important emirates, Abu Dhabi’s ruler becomes the UAE president, and Dubai’s becomes the Vice President. For these reasons, this report will provide detailed accounts frequently from Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Starting with the Definitions: The International Version & The UAE Version

At the first stage, this report seeks to provide the international definition of tolerance by the UN, explaining how it was formulated and how the UN has given an utmost importance to the

virtue of tolerance. Then, the report goes on to explain how the UAE defined tolerance. Identifying the international definition with the UN might seem problematic at first sight. Nevertheless, the rationale for this identification is that because the UN since 1945 has been the largest international organization in terms of the number of its members and their geographical coverage, it made sense to use this UN definition.

In the Charter of the United Nations, the largest international organization that has ever been founded, nearly two-hundred member states have been called upon “to practice tolerance.”¹³ It is also emphasized that the UN is “committed to strengthening tolerance.”¹⁴ This reference to the concept of tolerance in an internationally recognized document is believed to signal that tolerance is of utmost importance. The definition of tolerance to which the UN seems to be adhering is that of former UNESCO Director, General Audrey Azoulay’s definition.¹⁵ Azoulay defined tolerance “as an act of humanity” and

underlined the diversity and the values that are attributed to it.

The UN also urged member states in 1996 to observe the International Day for Tolerance on 16 November.¹⁶ Also, by the Declaration of Principles on Tolerance¹⁷, in 1993, the UN proclaimed the year 1995 the United Nations Year for Tolerance.¹⁸ It is understood that there is an international sympathy for tolerance to be promoted by the states both in their relations and within their domestic structures. Associated with embodying the international society at certain times, the UN, as it has been clear, has given utmost importance for tolerance to be realized and practiced.

As the former definition has been evaluated, the latter definition must be elaborated as well. Let us proceed now to how the UAE has defined and made use of tolerance. The UAE, in turn, has defined tolerance in a way echoing the Founding Father Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan’s



creeds;

“Following the footsteps of Zayed, we are tolerant. Tolerance is harmony in difference. Tolerance, the virtue that makes peace possible, contributes to the replacement of the culture of war by a culture of peace. Tolerance is not concession, condescension, or indulgence. Tolerance is, above all, an active attitude prompted by recognition of the universal human rights and fundamental freedoms of others.”¹⁹

At first sight, the UN definition and the UAE definition of tolerance appeared reasonably closer to one another. Within this context, even from

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the first sentence, the definition expresses that tolerance stems from the Founding Father’s creeds. In the second sentence, there is an extolling expression associating harmony with difference. Furthermore, harmony and a veneration for difference are placed in a sense of being in favor of peace. At the end, the definition affiliates tolerance fundamentally and intrinsically with the recognition of the human rights and freedoms of others. Unless the fact that how it is practiced is not in focus, there is nothing wrong with the definition UAE has provided.

Another thing to be noticed in the definition of tolerance by the UAE is that it is an utterly political definition. It is political because it serves to further the political agenda of the UAE by creating a leadership role in the promotion of tolerance. The usages and functions of tolerance rhetoric appear to be directed towards influencing people’s hearts and minds. In this context, a thorough discrimination must be made between rhetoric and praxis of tolerance because the UAE seems to provide different experiences for tolerance in theory and praxis. Preaching about how human rights came to be an indispensable part of tolerance is one issue; nevertheless, the



UAE's human rights record demonstrates that it is not that tolerant.²⁰

As a conclusion, the UAE authorities came to introduce tolerance as a policy by which the UAE has been portrayed as a warden and a proponent of what tolerance represents in their image. It is clear that the UAE puts a serious effort to place itself through tolerance rhetoric as a tolerant, virtuous, and a friendly country. As part of these so-called embellished efforts of definition, the UAE has also proclaimed 2019 to be "a year of tolerance" as did the UN in 1993.²¹

The Institutionalization of Tolerance Rhetoric

In this stage, the report explains that certain practices in the UAE helped institutionalize tolerance rhetoric. Such practices have included but not limited to the remarks of notables of ruling families, the creation of a Ministry of Tolerance, convening related conferences and becoming a party to international declarations on tolerance. As I have specified above, the remarks of notables from ruling families in the UAE helped institutionalize tolerance rhetoric.

Dubai ruler and the Vice President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum declared that:

*"since its establishment, the UAE has promoted values of tolerance, coexistence, acceptance, and openness, and has become a safe haven for people from all over the world who can find it a place without discrimination based on religion."*²²

Also, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan issued a statement arguing that

*"The UAE is a place of tolerance, co-existence, and openness to other cultures."*²³

As is seen in these statements and many others, so-called religious tolerance is affiliated with coexistence with an openness to other cultures. Also, most of the statements by ruling family members have tried to place it in a historical context, implying that it has been a concept followed since the founding of the country. For instance, in the words of the founding father Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, the need to promote tolerance consisting of coexistence, openness, and other virtues, have emanated from a religious standpoint. Therefore, this is powerfully implying that this broader concept of tolerance must include a rhetoric of religious tolerance because it has a religious core.

The opening of the Ministry of Tolerance seemed to justify the portrayal of efforts of the UAE as a tolerance promoting country. Also, the casting of a leadership role for the UAE in promoting tolerance in a wider sense demonstrates that this policy has been pursued not only for the sake of tolerance itself but also for political objectives.

In an effort to institutionalize tolerance rhetoric, the UAE introduced the world's first Ministry of Tolerance in 2016.²⁴ According to the official statement in the opening, the task of the Ministry of Tolerance is said to include; raising the sense of being a community, enhancing inter-communal relations and supporting peaceful coexistence and observing activities for the creation of these aimed activities.²⁵ The opening of the Ministry of Tolerance seemed to justify the portrayal of efforts of the UAE as a tolerance promoting country. Also, the casting of a leadership

role for the UAE in promoting tolerance in a wider sense demonstrates that this policy has been pursued not only for the sake of tolerance itself but also for political objectives.

Within the context of the institutionalization of the rhetoric of tolerance, high-level visits between religious leaders have been put into practice as well. At this critical juncture, recently, one significant development raised the importance of the issue. In 2019, the spiritual leader of the Catholic world, the Pontiff visited the UAE and met with Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed and, Ahmet et-Tayyib, who is the Grand Imam of Al Azhar of Egypt, the highest Sunni authority according to some Islamic interpretations.²⁶ This first visit by an incumbent Pontiff to the Arabian Peninsula and this has been exploited by the UAE authorities in institutionalizing the rhetoric of tolerance.

Above, this report has argued that the definition of tolerance by the UAE is a political one. In this respect, it could be stated that rather than introducing tolerance for the sake of tolerance, the fundamental reason for the UAE to promote tolerance and the effort to institutionalize it as a solid policy grows out of the need to counter-extremism and religious fundamentalism.²⁷ This also explains why the UAE promotes tolerance rhetoric; it is basically to undermine the Islamist movements across the Middle East.

The Manipulation of Institutionalization: Praxis Incongruent With Theory

In this stage, this report will elaborate on the core argument that contrary to what has been claimed, the UAE, to a certain extent, is religiously intolerant. Almost 90 percent of the people living in the UAE are non-citizens.²⁸ Therefore, there are many people who belong to non-Islamic faiths. A cursory observation could support the argument that the most noticeable non-Islamic communities in the UAE are Christians, Buddhists,

Sikhs, and Jews.²⁹ However, the official religion in the UAE, as it is enshrined in the constitution, is Islam.³⁰ Unlike the countries in the region, the UAE allows non-Islamic faiths to be addressed in their varying houses of prayers such as synagogue, temple, and church.³¹ It is clear that the religious tolerance issue in the UAE has observable outputs. It needs to be inferred that, as I have indicated above, of the seven emirates the most important ones are Abu Dhabi and Dubai and their ruling families are of Sunni origin. Therefore, stating that Islam is the official religion does not guarantee that all Islamic interpretations are welcomed as are Sunni teachings.

Domestic Mistreatment of Religious Communities

The UAE International Religious Freedom Report 2017 published by the US State Department provided detailed accounts on how freedom of worship and freedom of religion were practiced in the UAE.³² It is clear that the UAE constitution guarantees freedom of worship.³³ However, non-Islamic believers did not hesitate to state that freedom of worship is only enjoyed comfortably in private, but public practice of worship may be subject to certain challenges.³⁴ Also, non-Islamic houses of prayers are allowed in the UAE but people from non-Islamic faiths emphasized that their capacity is inefficient for serving the needs of the people.³⁵

As these statements have suggested, the UAE government does not allow or simply obstruct non-Muslims to worship, preach, or conduct prayers in public. This is obviously a sign of how rhetoric and praxis can be completely dissimilar in the case of the concept of tolerance. Other than that the UAE laws prohibited non-Islamic houses of prayers from depicting religious symbols such as “bell towers” or “crosses.”³⁶ This might also be regarded as a departure from freedom of worship and freedom of religion, the virtues praised by the UAE in accordance with its so-called tolerant attitude. What is critical is

whether this is done by the public as a whole or that the government raises the bars for non-Islamic faith believers to prevent them from practicing their religion. The fact that non-Islamic religious communities in the UAE accentuated that the society might be regarded as tolerant to a degree suggests that religious intolerance is first and foremost caused by the governmental practices either implicitly or explicitly.³⁷ In this context, this statement suggests that domestic mistreatment might be a valid component of the argument that the UAE, to a certain extent, is religiously intolerant contrary to what its authorities have long maintained. Therefore, what seems to be important is to reveal the procedures introduced by the government.

This report has reiterated that the idea that Muslims are protected and the non-Islamic faiths are excluded is irrelevant because, even in different interpretations of Islam, there are instances of religious intolerance. For instance, a Muslim rights activist in the UAE, Ahmed Mansoor was sentenced to 10 year in prison for allegedly criticizing the government. That decree came only after two weeks the UAE announced the Year of Tolerance.

This report has reiterated that the idea that Muslims are protected and the non-Islamic faiths are excluded is irrelevant because, even in different interpretations of Islam, there are instances of religious intolerance. For instance, a Muslim rights activist in the UAE, Ahmed Mansoor was sentenced to 10 year in prison for allegedly criticizing the government. That decree came only after the UAE announced the Year of Tolerance.³⁸ However, the governmental practices

on the Shia community have not been as forceful as it has been on the believers of non-Islamic faiths.

Another issue that demonstrates the religious tolerance is that people in the UAE cannot access and gather information about on other major religions. The UAE International Religious Freedom Report 2018 has concluded that: “The service providers continued to block other sites on religion-related topics, including some with information on Judaism, Christianity, atheism, and testimonies of former Muslims who converted to Christianity.”

The report has stated earlier that almost 90 percent of the people living in the UAE are not citizens. The number of Shia citizens of the UAE is nearly the 15% of the whole population of citizens and they largely prefer to live in Dubai and Sharjah emirates. The governmental practices for the Shia community have included cutting back on financial assets of the Shia communities’ mosques. Shia mosques are considered to be private on the part of the government and, if they have convenient features, only then can they call upon the government for financial back-up.³⁹ The fact that this process is not automatic raises the question of why Shia mosques have to go through certain processes that Sunni mosques have not gone through.

The General Authority of Islamic Affairs and Endowments (AWQAF) is obliged to designate what should be preached in Friday prayers in all the Emirates but Dubai.⁴⁰ This is interesting because, as it has been indicated above, Dubai, along with Sharjah, is home to most Shia in the country. In Dubai, a local authority identifies what should be preached in Friday prayers or limits what could be the theme of sermons in prayers. It is understood that the UAE federal government reviews Abu Dhabi and Dubai differently, along with reviewing the Sunni community and the Shia community differently.

Religious intolerance: anti-Islamist foreign policy

Another dominant component of the core argument is pertinent to foreign policy. Above, it has been clarified that the definition of tolerance stems from religious roots. Yet despite this intrinsic connection between tolerance and religion, the foreign policy is intensively opposed to movements that it labels as Islamist. Within this particular background, to minimize the adverse impacts that these so-called “radical and fundamental” Islamist groups, the UAE made an effort to moderate Islam in order to portray itself as a religiously tolerant country. In this way, it might be suggested that the gravest threat to the UAE national security is that the increasing influence of the Islamist movements. To fight against Islamist movements drastically, the UAE vigorously decried the Muslim Brotherhood and labeled it as a terrorist organization in 2014.⁴¹

Since the UAE has adopted an anti-Islamist policy, it is suggested that it pays serious attention to observe the suspicious activities of Muslims in the country. Along with observing Muslims in the country, the UAE holds a great number of events and forums to minimize the negative effects of the so-called Islamist movements. In this sense, in 2016, the UAE signed the Marrakesh Declaration on religious tolerance as a way to raising awareness to counter extremism.

Then, a logical conclusion might be needed. Why does the UAE act against the Islamist movements now that it has claimed to be tolerant? As it has been demonstrated, the UAE does make use of its religious tolerance rhetoric to crack down on the Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Under the guise of religious tolerance rhetoric, the UAE has become the cheer-leader of an official “Anti-Muslim Brotherhood-ism.”⁴² It could be put forward that the UAE considers fostering and encouraging religious tolerance as a way to counter extremist

interpretations of Islam. Parallel to the struggle against violent radicalization, extremist and fundamental ideologies, the religious tolerance is encouraged. There is more than one argument that can distort or even falsify the claims that the UAE is a tolerant country or more precisely that the UAE authorities are tolerant as they have claimed.

To clarify, this report does not criticize the UAE for not embracing the movements that it labels as Islamist. The criticism is that the UAE fights these movements under the guise of tolerance. As I have attempted to demonstrate, it is clear that this is not only the case.

Concluding remarks

Since the UAE is a federal country whose each emirate offers distinct social experiences, imagining the UAE as a country that has the same experiences in every province would be mistaken. Therefore, instances of religious intolerance might change from emirate to emirate.

This paper has sought to elucidate that tolerance rhetoric in the UAE is not promoted for the sake of tolerance, but it has political implications. To do so, this paper in the first stage reviewed the international definition of tolerance, which is, in this case, the definition of the UN. Along with the UN’s definition, the definition of the UAE has also been provided.

Then, the institutionalization of tolerance rhetoric by the creation of Ministry of Tolerance and convening occasions and related events have been demonstrated. What seemed significant is that the UAE authorities exploit tolerance as a way to galvanize people’s attention. Also, tolerance has almost always defined by associating it with coexistence, openness, and other virtues.

Ultimately, in the third stage, the report has dealt with the manipulation of institutionalization. In this stage, I have supported my core argument

with two-dimensional sub-arguments. The first one is the domestic mistreatment of religious communities, and the second one is the anti-Islamist foreign policy of the UAE. Both sub-arguments express, if not wholly falsify, that the UAE is not religiously tolerant; rather, it exploits the concept of tolerance for the sake of political advantages.

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³⁸ “The List of Saudi – UAE Atrocities that Washington Deliberately Ignores (Accessed: September 2019) <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/the-list-of-saudi-uae-atrocities-that-washington-deliberately-ignores-23965>

³⁹ “United Arab Emirates - 2017 International Religious Freedom Report,” 9.

⁴⁰ “United Arab Emirates - 2017 International Religious Freedom Report,” 1.

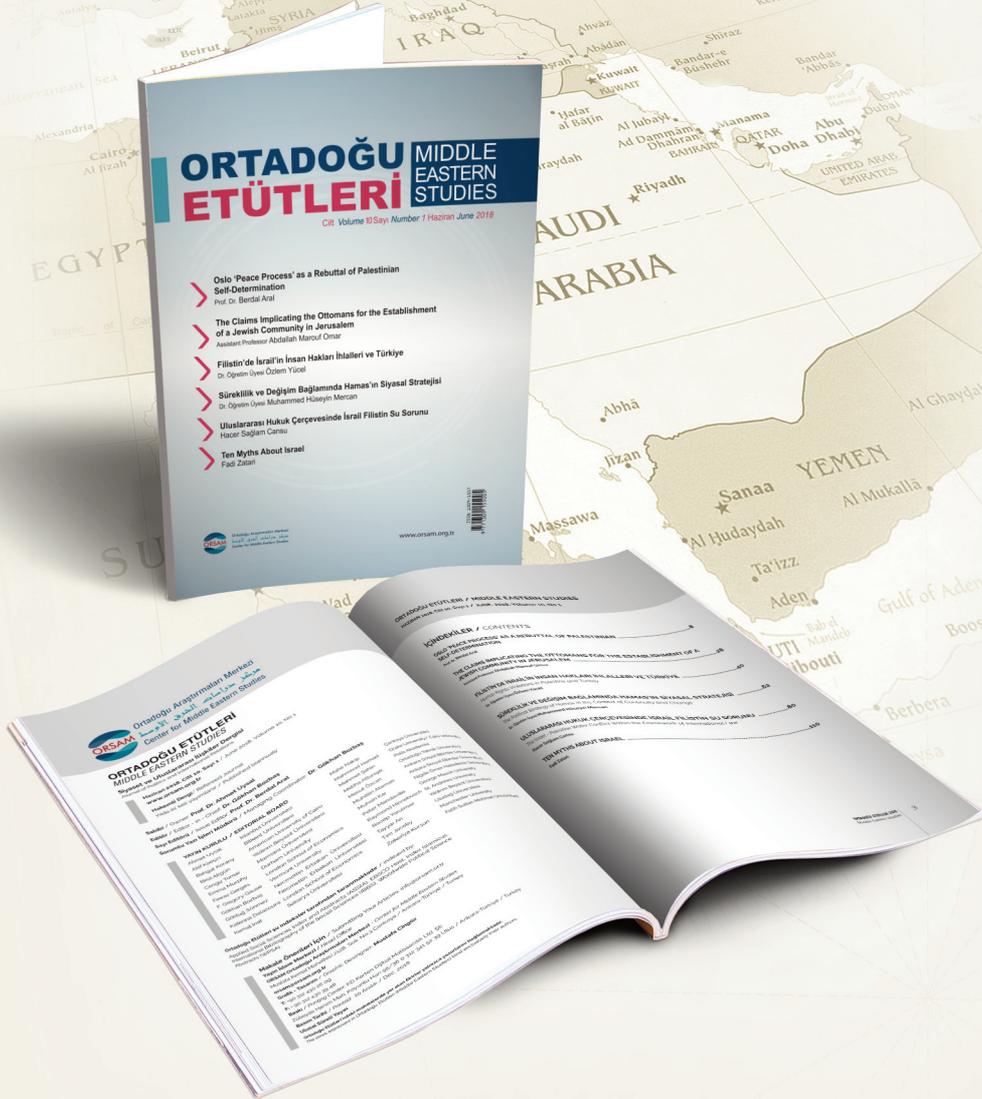
⁴¹ “UAE Lists Muslim Brotherhood as Terrorist Group,” Reuters, accessed June 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-politics-brotherhood/uae-lists-muslim-brotherhood-as-terrorist-group-idUSKCN0IZ00M20141115>.

⁴² Jillian Schwedler, “Why Academics Can’t Get beyond Moderates and Radicals,” The Washington Post, accessed June 15, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/12/why-academics-cant-get-beyond-moderates-and-radicals/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.23f3cf9103de.



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Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128. Sok.
No:3 ankaya/Ankara

+90 (312) 430 26 09
+90 (312) 430 39 48

info@orsam.org.tr
www.orsam.org.tr

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