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The Computational Homeland: Epistemic Sovereignty for Small States in the AI Age

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The Computational Homeland: Epistemic Sovereignty for Small States in the AI Age

EPIC – EMIRATI PERSPECTIVES AND INSIGHT CENTRE

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Introduction

When a government ministry drafts a policy brief with a foreign large language model, when a schoolchild receives homework explanations shaped by training data collected far from home, and when a public portal answers citizens in a dialect filtered through someone else's alignment rules, something more than convenience is at stake. The question is not only whether the answers are accurate. It is whose horizon of meaning is being installed as the default infrastructure of thought. This essay names that stake the computational homeland: the capacity of a state, especially a small or middle power, to host, train, govern, and culturally ground the models that increasingly mediate public knowledge, administration, and economic life.

The Arab world sits in a distinctive position. It is neither a bystander nor a primary seat of the current United States–China technology rivalry, yet it is already a dense user of AI systems designed elsewhere. The United Arab Emirates offers a useful case, not as a finished template for every Arab capital, and not as a claim that sovereignty is a product one can buy, but as evidence that a small state can refuse the false choice between closed autarky and uncritical import. The argument that follows draws on Martin Heidegger's account of modern technology as *Gestell*, Yuk Hui's cosmotechnics, Jürgen Habermas's critique of technocratic consciousness, and Ibn Khaldun's concepts of *'asabiyya* and *'umran*, and then turns to concrete UAE initiatives that can be independently verified.

Imported Neutrality and the Politics of Defaults

Large models arrive packaged as tools. Their interfaces promise assistance, productivity, and universal reason. Beneath the packaging sits a dense stack of choices: which languages and dialects are richly represented; which historical narratives are treated as baseline; which forms of speech are flagged as unsafe; which economic and social assumptions are written into evaluation benchmarks. None of these choices is a pure fact of nature. They are settlements of power that travel as technical defaults.

Heidegger's 1954 essay "The Question Concerning Technology" remains useful here, not as a romantic rejection of machines, but as a warning about a mode of revealing. Gestell, often translated as enframing, names the way modern technology orders the world as standing-reserve—resources available for calculation and use. Applied to AI, the danger is not that models "think." The danger is that they reorganize judgment itself into a permanently available stock of answers, so that inquiry becomes retrieval and political disagreement becomes a problem of optimization. A state that outsources that stock without residual capacity to inspect, localize, or refuse it does not merely buy software. It imports a framing of what counts as a legitimate question.

Habermas sharpens the political edge. In "Technology and Science as 'Ideology'" (1968), he argued that technocratic consciousness dissolves the distinction between instrumental problem-solving and normative self-determination. When expert systems present contested ends as if they were technical necessities, citizens are invited to accept arrangements rather than deliberate them. Generative AI intensifies that invitation. A fluent answer can feel like the end of an argument. For Arab publics already navigating asymmetric media ecosystems, the risk is a second-order depoliticization: decisions about cultural representation, public service design, and education standards migrate into model behavior while remaining formally unowned by any domestic institution.

Cosmotechnics Against the Single Stack

Yuk Hui's concept of cosmotechnics, developed in [The Question Concerning Technology in China](#) (Urbanomic, 2016), rejects the assumption that there is only one universal technics waiting to be perfected. In his e-flux essay "[Cosmotechnics as Cosmopolitics](#)" (2017), Hui offers a preliminary definition: "the unification of the cosmos and the moral through technical activities, whether craft-making or art-making," adding that there have been not one or two technics "but many cosmotechnics." The point is not folkloric decoration of Western tools. It is that technical systems always already carry a moral cosmology, and that plural cosmotechnics can coexist without collapsing into either chauvinism or homogenization.

For the Gulf, cosmotechnics is a practical research program. Arabic is diglossic; Gulf, Levantine, Egyptian, and Maghrebi varieties sit alongside Modern Standard Arabic; religious, legal, and literary canons are not peripheral color but infrastructures of social life. A model trained primarily on English web scrapes and then lightly adapted to Arabic will tend to treat that infrastructure as noise to be smoothed. Building Arabic-first or Arabic-strong models, evaluating them on Arabic-native benchmarks, and placing them under domestic governance regimes is therefore not cultural vanity. It is the construction of a computational homeland: a place where the moral and linguistic order of a society can meet its technical order without apology.

Digital 'Asabiyya and 'Umran

Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah remains the Arab world's most consequential account of how civilizations rise and hold together. 'Asabiyya—group feeling, social cohesion, the capacity of a collectivity to act as one—is not a romantic bond. It is a political resource that makes 'umran, the flourishing of settlement and civilization, possible. When 'asabiyya decays, dynasties and cities weaken even if their monuments remain.

We propose, carefully, the term digital 'asabiyya for a contemporary condition of that resource. Digital 'asabiyya is not online nationalism or influencer sentiment. It is the shared capacity of a political community to maintain trust in its knowledge institutions while those institutions digitize: schools, courts, ministries, archives, media, and research universities. Without it, 'umran in the AI era becomes a glittering dependency—smart cities running on someone else's models, fluent dashboards whose categories were never publicly argued. With it, a small state can absorb global technology without dissolving the social bond that makes public authority intelligible.

Digital 'asabiyya has institutional markers. They include domestic research talent that can audit and improve models; open or open-access releases that let local developers build rather than only consume; procurement rules that require localization and security review; and a public language that treats culture as infrastructure rather than as a branding layer. None of these markers requires isolation. They require residual capacity.

Beyond the United States–China Binary: A Gulf Path

Public commentary often frames AI geopolitics as a bipolar contest: Washington versus Beijing, open versus closed, "democratic AI" versus "authoritarian AI." That frame is too coarse for the Arab world. Gulf states maintain commercial, security, and technological relationships with multiple centers. Their interest is not to become a satellite of either pole, nor to pretend that neutrality is costless. Their interest is to convert interdependence into leverage without mistaking access for ownership.

A Gulf model of computational homeland has four working principles. First, build domestic model capacity sufficient to set local defaults in language, public services, and research. Second, remain interoperable with global cloud and chip ecosystems rather than chasing illusory self-sufficiency. Third, treat partnerships as contracts with assurance regimes, not as blank trust. Fourth, invest in universities and open research so that sovereignty is a skill base, not a slogan. The UAE's record since 2017 illustrates these principles in practice, with both achievements and unresolved tensions.

Verified Building Blocks: Strategy, Models, Institutions

In October 2017, the UAE government launched its Strategy for Artificial Intelligence, described on the official UAE government portal as the first of its kind in the region and the world, aiming to integrate AI into government services and infrastructure ([UAE Government portal](#)). In the same month, the UAE appointed a Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, described by the state news agency as [the world's first]([WAM](#)), signaling that AI was being treated as a cabinet-level domain rather than a back-office experiment. In April 2019, the UAE Cabinet adopted the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2031, with the stated aim of positioning the UAE as a global AI leader and developing an integrated system for AI in vital sectors, overseen by the Emirates Council for Artificial Intelligence and Digital Transactions ([UAE Cabinet](#)).

Strategy without institutions is rhetoric. In October 2019, Abu Dhabi announced the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI) as the world's first graduate-level, research-based university dedicated to AI, offering master's and doctoral programs in machine learning, computer vision, and natural language processing ([WAM](#)). A university of this kind is an instrument of digital 'asabiyya: it produces people who can contest model claims rather than only consume them.

Model capacity followed. In May 2023, Abu Dhabi's Technology Innovation Institute (TII) released Falcon 40B as an open-source large language model, [royalty-free for research and commercial use](#); in September 2023, TII released Falcon 180B, a 180-billion-parameter model trained on 3.5 trillion tokens and made available under an open-access license framework based on Apache 2.0 ([TII](#)). On 30 August 2023, Inception, a G42 company, with MBZUAI and Cerebras Systems, open-sourced Jais, a 13-billion-parameter Arabic-English model trained on a purpose-built bilingual dataset including 116 billion Arabic tokens, explicitly framed as a contribution for more than 400 million Arabic speakers ([Cerebras; MBZUAI](#)). In May 2025, TII introduced Falcon-Arabic, a 7-billion-parameter adaptation of Falcon 3 aimed at Modern Standard Arabic and dialects, reporting strong results on the Open Arabic LLM Leaderboard ([TII on Hugging Face](#)). These releases do not end dependence on foreign stacks. They demonstrate that a small state can put Arabic and Gulf research into the global model supply on terms it helps set.

Partnership architecture matters as much as parameter counts. In April 2024, Microsoft announced a \$1.5 billion strategic investment in G42, with Microsoft President Brad Smith joining G42's board and with both firms describing a first-of-its-kind Intergovernmental Assurance Agreement developed in consultation with the UAE and U.S. governments ([Microsoft](#)). Earlier reporting had already documented G42's public commitment to phase out Chinese hardware suppliers, including Huawei, as it deepened U.S. partnerships ([Fortune](#)). The pressure behind that decision was explicit: "We cannot work with both sides. We can't," G42 chief executive Peng Xiao told the Financial Times,

as [quoted by Fortune](#). In May 2025, OpenAI announced Stargate UAE—a planned 1GW cluster in Abu Dhabi with 200MW expected to go live in 2026—as the first international deployment of Stargate and the first partnership under "OpenAI for Countries," involving G42, Oracle, NVIDIA, Cisco, and SoftBank, developed in coordination with the U.S. government ([OpenAI](#)). These arrangements show a middle-power strategy under pressure: attach to trusted supply chains, insist on assurance frameworks, and keep domestic firms and research bodies as principals rather than mere customers.

The record also exposes a gap that policy should track. TII's own release note listed Falcon 180B as compatible with English, German, Spanish, and French, with limited capabilities in several other European languages; Arabic was not among them. Arabic strength arrived through separate efforts, Jais and later Falcon-Arabic. Owning model weights is necessary for a computational homeland, but it is not sufficient: a model can be built at home and still not be anchored in home knowledge.

Normative scaffolding has also appeared. In 2024, the UAE Artificial Intelligence Office [launched](#) the UAE Charter for the Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence, a guiding framework whose principles, as summarized on the official UAE government portal, include human oversight, transparency, safety, bias mitigation, privacy, governance and accountability, and inclusive access ([UAE Government portal](#)). Charters are not statutes. Their value lies in naming obligations that procurement and institutional practice can later harden.

What the Arab World Should Take—and Refuse

Other Arab states need not copy Abu Dhabi's capital intensity. They can still adopt the underlying logic. First, treat language models as cultural infrastructure: fund Arabic corpora, dialect coverage, and evaluation suites that reflect local law, history, and education standards. Second, refuse the myth of technical neutrality in public procurement: require disclosure of training data provenance, localization options, and override rights for public-sector deployments. Third, build thin but real domestic capacity—a research lab, a university track, an open-model release—even where a full foundation-model race is impossible. Fourth, negotiate partnerships that include assurance, audit rights, and skills transfer, rather than cloud subscriptions alone.

They should also refuse two traps. The first is closed imitation of great-power techno-nationalism, which mistakes walls for strength and starves researchers of collaboration. The second is consumer sovereignty: the belief that buying the best foreign chatbot is enough. Buying access without the ability to inspect, adapt, and govern is not a computational homeland. It is a leased mind.

Policy Implications

For UAE and Gulf policymakers, three priorities follow. One is to bind open-model prestige to public-sector accountability: Falcon, Jais, and their successors should be accompanied by published evaluation reports that include Arabic-native tasks, safety failures, and cultural edge cases, not only English leaderboard wins. Two is to treat compute campuses such as Stargate UAE as dual-use civic infrastructure: connectivity and capacity should expand domestic research access and regional public goods, not only commercial inference. Three is to translate the 2024 AI Charter into enforceable procurement clauses for ministries and state-linked entities—human oversight, logging, and contestability as conditions of deployment.

For Arab regional institutions and donors, the task is complementary: support shared Arabic evaluation resources; fund fellowships that keep talent circulating inside the region; and create a standing forum where model governance is debated in Arabic as well as English, so that Habermasian public reason is not permanently outsourced to Silicon Valley product blogs.

Conclusion

The computational homeland is not a fortress. It is a settlement of capacity: models one can host, talent one can trust, norms one can argue, and a digital 'asabiyya strong enough to keep 'umran from becoming a showroom for other people's defaults. Heidegger reminds us that enframing can reduce the world to standing-reserve; Hui reminds us that other cosmotechnics are possible; Habermas reminds us that technical fluency is not democratic legitimacy; Ibn Khaldun reminds us that civilization rests on cohesion before it rests on monuments. The UAE's strategy, universities, open models, and assurance-backed partnerships show that a small Arab state can pursue sovereignty without closure. The unfinished work is to make that pursuit a regional habit of institutions rather than a headline of launches—so that the next generation inherits not only smarter tools, but a homeland that still knows how to think in its own voice.

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