

Troubling Ambiguities in the UAE's Role in Yemen

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September 8, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

It has been almost two and a half years since Saudi Arabia led a military intervention in Yemen ostensibly to restore its legitimate government to power under the leadership of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Neither have President Hadi and his government been repatriated to the capital, Sanaa, nor has the alliance between the Houthi rebels and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh been fully defeated, although major victories have been scored against it. Since August 2014, when the Houthi-Saleh forces usurped the government's authority and reached as far south as the city of Aden, Yemenis have suffered death and destruction, dislocation, scarcity, and, finally, cholera—all adding human tragedy to decades of poverty and political chaos.

The United Arab Emirates has been among Saudi Arabia's erstwhile allies in Yemen since the beginning of Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015. It has expended effort, time, and human and financial treasure to influence events in the country. But throughout the campaign, the UAE has, for various reasons, followed a parallel political and military strategy that has supported an alternate leadership to Hadi's government in southern Yemen. Such a strategy has indeed become obvious after frictions surfaced between President Hadi and his UAE-supported lieutenants, and between him and Emirati political leaders. This exposes the entire restoration of Yemeni legitimacy to uncertain circumstances, puts Saudi Arabia and the UAE at cross purposes on a matter of absolute importance to the Kingdom's national security,

and adds to the threats of disunity among members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The UAE's Participation in the Yemen War

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It would be shortsighted to think of the UAE's involvement in the ongoing Yemen war in 2015 merely in terms of restoring legitimate authority to the Arabian Peninsula's poorest neighbor, solidarity with the other members of the GCC, or defense of collective security, although these are central strategic considerations for the UAE. Instead, a more logical analysis would position its involvement within the post-Arab Spring political and strategic environment, one that, to the UAE leadership, contained worrisome developments challenging the Arab world's status quo led by the Gulf monarchies. Before this intervention in March 2015, the UAE had cooperated in anti-piracy operations from the Gulf of Oman to East Africa, participated militarily against Libya's Muammar Qadhafi in 2011, supported a putsch against Mohamed Morsi in Egypt in 2013, and bombed the so-called Islamic State in Syria after 2014.

For the UAE, Yemen represented, and still represents, the coalescence of many challenging factors and possible opportunities. First, it is home to the Arabian Peninsula's largest

native¹ population, currently over 28 million; and 54 percent of the 2014 population had lived below the poverty line. Second, a coalition of the pro-Iranian Houthi insurgents (known as Ansar Allah) and forces loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh have usurped legitimate authority in Sanaa and established an alternative political structure, a National Salvation Government, although that is currently experiencing some discord. This coalition controls sizeable stretches of the country, including strategic areas and the Hodeida seaport on the Red Sea. Third, a wide swathe of Yemen is beyond any authority except that of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State, thus constituting a serious security threat to the entire GCC. Finally, southern Yemen sits astride a chokehold of international sea trade in the Bab al-Mandab waterway that controls maritime transit between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal.

As an ambitious state--US Secretary of Defense James Mattis called it "Little Sparta"--the UAE thus finds itself having to participate in the Yemen war despite its uncertainties; at the same time, it seeks to steer the winds of Yemen in a course conducive to serving its long-term strategic interests. Operationally, the UAE participated as one of a ten-country coalition in the initial military action, Operation Decisive Storm (now called Operation Renewal of Hope), deploying 30 fighter jets. Its air force is still very active over Yemen, responsible with other

coalition members for the majority of civilian deaths in the country, according to a United Nations report issued September 5. The UAE has also played a major role in ground operations, including helping to wrest control of the southern city of Aden from the Houthi-Saleh alliance in July 2015 and to seize the strategic Mocha port on the Red Sea in 2017.

Today, the UAE is providing crucial support to Yemeni forces engaging AQAP in Yemen's east and on its Arabian Sea shore. Successful advances have been made over the last two years against what the United States considers a serious security threat in the Arabian Peninsula. However, what casts doubt on these operations is the fact that they are conducted by contingents expressly aligned with the southern forces clamoring for secession, a situation that may raise doubts about the UAE's commitment to a unified Yemen. The UAE also provided help to a US Navy SEAL team that conducted a mission against AQAP last January. Furthermore, since the beginning of Operation Decisive Storm, the UAE Navy has participated in a siege off the western Yemeni shore.

It is worthy to note that these feats were accomplished at a dear price in lives: the UAE is estimated to have lost at least 94 soldiers in Yemen by mid-August, the latest of whom were four who died in a helicopter crash in Shabwah Governorate. (This would be equivalent to roughly about 25,000 American troops killed in a foreign war.) Indeed, its declaration in June of

¹ As opposed to a combination of natives and expatriates, as is the case in the other countries of the peninsula.

2016 that the Yemen war was over for the UAE was not quite accurate since it is shouldering the counterterrorism burden in the country that is so important to the United States and Saudi Arabia. It is also important to note that the UAE's humanitarian and developmental assistance to Yemen between April 2015 and March 2017 totaled \$2 billion.

The UAE's Mistakes in Yemen

Involvement in foreign wars arguably always brings unwanted negative attention and opens the door for unwarranted mistakes, and the UAE's engagement in Yemen is no different. What adds to the delicate nature of the Emirati involvement alongside Saudi Arabia--the putative leader of the Arab coalition--are ambitions the UAE wishes to realize in southern Yemen. These ambitions may very well be at the expense of both Yemen's unity and traditional Saudi Arabian relationships in Yemeni society.

From a human rights perspective, the UAE's record in Yemen leaves much to be desired. There are the previously mentioned accusations of the coalition's responsibility--including the UAE's--for the death of Yemeni civilians and the prolongation of the conflict. Then there is the wide-ranging investigation by the Associated Press, published in June 2017, that blamed the UAE for the existence of some 18 clandestine centers along southern Yemen where hundreds of suspects were disappeared and tortured by Emirati troops and surrogate Yemeni forces, and interrogated by US troops. Another report published in July detailed

activist killings by terrorist outfits and detentions and illegal activities by Security Belt Forces funded by the UAE in the city of Aden.

Politically, the UAE's relationship with Yemeni President Hadi has also been poor and harmful to the cause of restoring legitimate authority to the country. Reports abound about the political differences between him and UAE officials. One spoke of a meeting in February between him and Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, which ended in anger when Hadi accused the latter of behaving like an occupier in southern Yemen. Another reported the president firing the governor of Aden, Major General Aidarous al-Zubaidi, and a state minister, Hani bin Breik, who are close to the UAE. The two later formed a secessionist body, the Southern Transition Council, that is supported by many governors of other southern governorates and by former president of South Yemen Ali Salem al-Beidh. More reports relayed dangerous news about President Hadi being prevented from landing in Aden, the country's de facto capital.

These mistakes and developments speak of direct UAE involvement in domestic Yemeni affairs that arguably may be seen as more than that, since Hadi's government still lives at the mercy of the Saudi Arabian-Emirati alliance and actually is seated more in Riyadh than in Aden. What is feared is that this overt role might create a rift with Saudi Arabia, which is most concerned about Yemen's unity and security. Last May, UAE-supported troops clashed with Saudi-backed forces loyal to Hadi over control

of Aden airport. The UAE's role may also result in the total collapse of Hadi's government, which is the internationally recognized legitimate authority in the country. While the UAE is keen to appear fully supportive of the Saudi Arabian mission in Yemen, its actions vis-à-vis Hadi and support of secessionist forces in the country are bound to weaken him and strip away his legitimacy.

A Smarter UAE Role in Yemen

Yemen's wars have raged on since at least 2004, when the Houthi insurgency challenged the authority of former president Saleh, precipitating a series of confrontations between parts of the north and the rest of the country. The latest edition of these wars has seen the 2014 Houthi-Saleh armed challenge to the Hadi presidency and the 2015 response by the Saudi-led coalition. Neither the Yemeni people nor the coalition countries reaped the hoped-for peace or the security from a peaceful and stable Yemen. With Saudi Arabia reportedly eager for an end to its two-and-a-half-year participation in what has clearly become a quagmire, it is high time for all parties concerned to truly support a political solution engineered by the United Nations envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, one built on compromise and accommodation.

As the presumed second most important actor in the coalition and obviously the one with varied strategic interests, the UAE would do well to work toward the following objectives.

First, and foremost, UAE leaders must allow the legitimate Yemeni president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, to exercise full authority in his temporary capital Aden and support his efforts to rebuild the institutions necessary for his rule and for reviving the Yemeni state.

Concomitantly, the UAE would do well to recognize that supporting secessionist forces in the south is a recipe for continued fighting, not only with the Houthi-Saleh forces but also among their antagonists. Yemeni unity was accomplished in 1990 because both northerners and southerners saw benefit in it. The UAE's encouragement of re-dividing Arabia Felix into two equally needy halves reestablishes an unacceptable status quo ante. The UAE should also realize that it will be counted on to indefinitely support the future rump state financially and militarily, which it may not be able to sustain no matter the rewards to its strategic posture and interests. At any rate, the UAE's strategic interests in Yemen's ports, for instance, would be equally served by both a unified Yemen and a newly reestablished southern state.

Second, the UAE--and Saudi Arabia and other coalition members, for that matter--must support the efforts of UN Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed to devise a political solution to the Yemeni crisis. Two important developments now make this solution more possible. The first is the fact that the Houthi-Saleh alliance may have become too frayed despite efforts to repair differences. The second is the apparent opening between Saudi Arabia and Iran that has become

more possible in spite of the continuing bickering between Riyadh and Tehran. If the Houthis-Saleh alliance breaks up and the two Gulf rivals find an accommodation, compromises may very well lead to a long-sought and acceptable solution.

Third, in its bilateral relationship with Yemen, the UAE should dial down its antagonism toward essential political forces in that country, like the Islah Party, which is considered an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE cannot hope to do away with the party by proxy--as happened when General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi staged a coup in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi--if President Hadi were to decide to cooperate with Islah. In fact, Hadi's deputy, former general Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, is on very good terms with the party and has actually replaced the former prime minister and vice president, Khaled al-Bahah, who was considered the UAE's man in Aden.

Fourth, as probably the best equipped and trained armed forces for the mission, the UAE military would do well to continue its counterterrorism operations against AQAP and the Islamic State. A major caveat, however, would be that such operations be conducted with Yemen's national army under the unified leadership represented by President Hadi and not explicitly with secessionist forces. For this purpose, the UAE needs to quickly repair its relations with the legitimate president and offer its assistance for a successful strategy to regain

the government's control over all areas currently in extremists' hands.