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Seas, Checks, and Guns: Emirati and Saudi Maritime Interests in the Yemen Conflict

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The maritime objectives of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war have played an essential role in determining the conflict's direction. The military intervention by a Saudi-led coalition in March 2015 sought to defeat Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthis, and restore the internationally recognized government of then president Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi. Because they believed the United States was disengaging from the Middle East, Saudi and Emirati officials sought to control vital waterways, leading to their investment in ports and military bases in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. This allowed both countries to protect their maritime borders, assert their regional authority, and support their commercial interests.

Beyond the domestic dimensions of the Yemeni conflict, the coalition's primary objective was to prevent Iran from expanding its influence in and around Yemen. The Saudi and Emirati fear was that Tehran would carry out attacks against shipping lanes in the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait that were vital to their strategic interests, as well as against nearby Gulf countries.

The July 2015 [capture of Aden](#), home to one of the world's largest deep-water natural harbors, was pivotal in the coalition's efforts to establish a naval blockade of Yemen's ports and prevent the military resupply of the Houthis by Iran. Aden became Yemen's interim capital, allowing the coalition and its local partners to establish a foothold in the south from where they could push northward toward the capital Sanaa, which was then controlled by the Houthis. Despite making some initial [territorial gains](#) in the oil-rich governorate of Marib, east of Sanaa, the coalition's counteroffensive lost momentum and the conflict gradually became a stalemate.

In light of this, from 2018 onward the UAE began recalibrating its strategy, advancing its own interests ahead of those of the coalition. Its primary aims were to control Yemen's coastlines and shipping lanes and implement a "string of ports" strategy, while also thwarting the spread of political Islam. However, this process led to rivalry between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as their interests in Yemen diverged. The UAE took control of key southern ports and the regions around



them, pushing them to advance a southern separatist project. Yet Saudi Arabia saw this strategy weaken its own main ally, the internationally recognized Yemeni government, leading to a breakdown in the anti-Houthi coalition and forcing the kingdom to face the Houthis alone on its border.

Though the UAE's maritime priorities have led to tensions with Saudi Arabia, both countries want to avoid a rupture in their relationship, largely because they share the same overriding objective in Yemen—defeating the Houthis. However, even if they succeed, both sides have other priorities in the country that are difficult to reconcile, making it likely that they will continue to engage in a struggle for influence.

Yemen's Maritime Boundaries in Emirati and Saudi Thinking

What happens in Yemen, which is strategically located along the Gulf of Aden at the intersection of the Arabian and Red Seas, has been critical for Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's regional and maritime ambitions. Control of the country's coastlines not only can affect global shipping through the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab Strait but also leaves Emirati and Saudi officials with the option of bypassing the increasingly volatile Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has threatened to close on several occasions.

The UAE's maritime ambitions are at the center of Emirati calculations. To become an economic hub linking East Africa and South Asia, the UAE has sought to reach agreements to control and operate a string of ports across the southern Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. In light of this, the port operator Dubai Ports World (DP World) has expanded regionally over the years. It entered into a joint venture with the state-owned Yemen Gulf of Aden Ports Company in 2006 to manage the Aden port. This was followed by agreements

to operate Djibouti's Doraleh Container Terminal in 2006 and Somaliland's Berbera Port in 2018.

Emirati plans faced setbacks, however, as the joint venture to manage Aden's port was cancelled by the Hadi government after the overthrow of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012. Djibouti's government also seized control of the Doraleh Container Terminal from DP World in 2018. The UAE envisions Dubai's Jebel Ali Port as the key logistics and trade hub linking Africa and Asia. Therefore, facing increasing competition from China, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia over ports in the Horn of Africa, the UAE chose to focus more on Yemen, where the international rivalry was less.

The Saudi-led coalition's failure to make any significant territorial advances in Yemen, as well as the death of Emirati soldiers in Hodeida and southern Yemen, made it increasingly difficult for the UAE to justify its participation in the war there. Furthermore, allegations of human rights violations by Emirati forces were damaging to the UAE's brand. In July 2019, the UAE announced a "strategic redeployment" from Hodeida, handing over control of several Red Sea military bases, including the ports of Mokha and Khokha, to Saudi forces. By October 2019, the UAE announced it had ended its military involvement in Yemen. Nevertheless, it gave assurances that its withdrawal would not leave a security vacuum, as it had trained 90,000 local fighters.

Indeed, the UAE's financial and military backing for local militias, particularly the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a secessionist movement it helped create in 2017, granted it significant leverage, particularly over maritime outposts. The UAE established and supported the Shabwani Elite Forces in Shabwa Governorate and the Hadrami Elite Forces in Hadramawt Governorate as well. These militias were involved in U.S.-backed counterterrorism operations against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, but they also gave the UAE the opportunity to position allies along the coast to control Yemeni ports, oil and gas fields, and export terminals.

This fit into the UAE's strategy of acquiring ports along major international shipping routes. It did so in the governorates of Aden, Hadramawt, Shabwa, and Ta'iz, as well as the archipelago of Socotra and the island of Mayun (also known as Perim) in the Bab al-Mandab strait. Emirati leaders also invested in the construction and renovation of local ports and military bases, thereby consolidating their hold over the facilities.

Saudi Arabia has followed a similar path. Because the UAE had limited success in establishing militias in Mahra Governorate, along the border with Oman, Saudi Arabia was able to pursue its aim of strengthening its control over Mahra's Nishtun Port. According to a document leaked in 2018, Riyadh planned to construct a pipeline from its Najran Province to Yemen's Mahra coast, so as to continue exporting oil if Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz. However, for now there is no indication this plan is going forward. The installation of Saudi cranes at Aden, Mukalla, and Mokha ports has highlighted the expansion of Riyadh's maritime interests in Yemen, beyond Mahra.

The primary focus of Riyadh's maritime strategy is centered on its Red Sea coast. Securing this maritime corridor is a vital element in Saudi Arabia's wider ambition to establish itself as a global tourism and logistics hub. As part of the country's Vision 2030 plan, the kingdom began the construction of a major Red Sea tourism project in 2019. In early 2020 it launched the Red Sea Alliance, a regional council involving eight countries, the purpose of which is to increase stability in the broader region by addressing security issues such as piracy and smuggling. The impact of the endeavor remains questionable, however, given that other major players in the Red Sea, such as Iran, Qatar, Turkey, and the UAE, have not been included.

Following the Emirati military withdrawal, UAE-backed separatist militias clashed regularly with Saudi-backed government forces, imperiling the war effort in Yemen by dividing and destabilizing coalition-controlled areas. Tensions escalated in August 2019 when the STC, allegedly supported by UAE air strikes, took control

of Aden, forcing government forces to withdraw. The violence quickly spread to Abyan and Shabwa, where separatists seized energy and maritime installations from the government.

To help counter the UAE's growing influence in southern Yemen, Saudi Arabia established and supported several local militias of its own. These included the National Shield Forces in Aden and the Amajid Brigade in Abyan. This set a dangerous precedent by laying the groundwork for internecine fighting in the south between pro-Saudi and pro-Emirati militias, fighting that risked further dividing the anti-Houthi coalition.

Through Saudi-mediated indirect talks between the Yemeni government and the STC to deescalate the situation, the two sides signed the Riyadh Agreement in November 2019. The provisions of the agreement included the formation of a new government that comprised the STC, centralization of all armed groups under government control, and Aden's demilitarization. For the UAE, the agreement ensured that the STC became a legitimate political stakeholder in Yemen's future, guaranteeing that the Emiratis would retain a strong hand despite their military pullout.

While the Riyadh Agreement was initially successful in establishing local ceasefires between separatist militants and government forces in Abyan, its main provisions have yet to be implemented, and all its deadlines have been missed. Because of the failure to implement a power-sharing arrangement under the Riyadh Agreement, the STC declared self-rule in April 2020, triggering fierce fighting across southern Yemen. Separatist fighters rushed to capture key commercial sites and maritime positions, including Abyan's port city of Zinjibar as well as oil fields in neighboring Shabwa Governorate. In June 2020, separatists also seized control of Socotra, deposing its governor and driving out government forces, a step Hadi condemned as a coup.

Although the STC rescinded its self-rule declaration in July after efforts by Saudi Arabia to scale down the conflict and accelerate the Riyadh Agreement,



there has been little progress toward the formation of a unity government or the integration of armed groups into Yemen's military. Saudi Arabia's attempts to counterbalance the STC by forming its own local militias in southern Yemen further obstructed the agreement's provisions on the demilitarization and centralization of armed groups.

Maritime Calculations in the Yemeni Endgame

Just as maritime objectives were at the center of Emirati and Saudi thinking when they entered the Yemen war, to a significant extent both countries will judge the conflict's potential outcomes on the basis of their maritime implications. While Saudi Arabia would like to see Yemen's government regain control over the entirety of the country, which also means its ports, the UAE benefits from continued fragmentation. This allows it to continue to control Yemeni ports while also isolating its Islamist enemies in Yemen. Yet Saudi Arabia and the UAE, despite their differences, are united in wanting to prevent a Houthi victory and avert a permanent rupture in their relationship.

From the UAE's perspective, a Houthi-controlled Yemen is a worst-case scenario because it would deprive Abu Dhabi of influence in the Arabian and Red Seas, while also denying the emirates access to lucrative postwar reconstruction contracts in Yemen. Factions among the UAE-backed forces have damaged the legitimacy of Yemen's government, causing instability in the south, although it is also true that some factions have [played a significant role in defending Yemen's southern governorates from Houthi incursions](#).

In September 2021, a Houthi offensive was successful in taking Bayda Governorate as well as parts of Marib Governorate, emboldening the Houthis to expand southward into the energy-rich governorate of Shabwa. In response, the UAE-backed Giants Brigades, a

part of the Yemeni National Resistance coalition, an independent force fighting on behalf of Yemen's government, was deployed to Shabwa. Collaborating with the local Shabwani Elite Forces, the Giants Brigades drove the Houthis out in less than ten days. A Houthi takeover of Shabwa's port and oil and gas facilities would have been detrimental to southern independence, worsening the already dire economic situation in the south while also impairing the UAE's maritime ambitions. Although the Houthi [drone attack against Abu Dhabi in January 2022](#) in retaliation for the UAE's support of the Giants Brigades may have increased the UAE's threat perception of the Houthis, it did not alter its strategy in Yemen.

Likewise for Saudi Arabia, a Houthi-controlled Yemen would prove disastrous for the kingdom's regional ambitions. Such an outcome would allow Iran, Riyadh's main regional adversary, to use its Houthi allies to pursue cross-border attacks against Saudi Arabia, as well as attacks along Red Sea shipping lanes.

Their shared worry about a Houthi victory pushed the Saudi and Emirati leadership to seek common ground by [establishing a Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council \(PLC\)](#) in Riyadh in April 2022. The PLC includes allies of both countries, among them the STC. However, the council remains divided, indicating that Saudi and Emirati interests continue to diverge. Ultimately, that is because the two countries have different perceptions of what constitutes a most-desirable outcome in Yemen.

As the situation stands, the UAE is in a better position than Saudi Arabia to safeguard its interests. The formation and political recognition of the STC, like the training and arming of local militias, has allowed the UAE to withdraw its forces and avoid entanglement in Yemen's war, while maintaining influence in the country. Emirati control of ports and energy facilities through its local proxies will also greatly increase its bargaining position in a postconflict scenario. Furthermore, the UAE's [reported building of military bases on Socotra and Mayun](#) will enhance its ability

to secure international shipping lanes, consolidating its “string of ports” strategy. Instability in southern Yemen and concerns over the security of Yemeni ports could also mean more traffic to the Jebel Ali Port, enhancing the UAE’s status as a global logistics hub.

For Saudi Arabia, in turn, the problem transcends maritime issues. A Saudi-aligned government could potentially allow the kingdom to build a pipeline to the Arabian Sea, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz and denying Iran the means to obstruct Saudi oil exports. However, that is not enough. A continued Houthi presence across the southern Saudi border still means Iran can indirectly target the kingdom, in particular its energy facilities. That explains why a unified Yemen under a pro-Saudi government remains a priority for Riyadh, beyond the maritime advantages involved.

A major additional complication in any postwar arrangement is the role of the Islah party in Yemen’s political future. The UAE’s strong opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, with which Islah shares strong ties, means it is unlikely to approve of any power-sharing arrangement that strengthens the party. Nevertheless, Islah enjoys strong backing in Yemen’s tribal areas and has two members in the PLC. This represents a significant obstacle with which the UAE will have to contend.

Yemen’s reunification would also present opportunities for, and simultaneously complicate, UAE interests in other ways. A main benefit of a Houthi defeat for the UAE would be capturing the Red Sea port of Hodeida, the only major Yemeni port outside the Emirati sphere of influence, whose location is vital to the security of the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb Strait. With a recognized government ruling Yemen, Emirati control over Hodeida would be much more difficult, if not impossible. However, in June 2018 UAE-backed militias fighting in the National Resistance coalition, including the Giants Brigades, the Tihama Resistance, and the Guards of the Republic, [played a critical role in the battle for Hodeida](#), capturing the city’s airport and

outskirts. In the event of the Arab coalition’s recapture of northern Yemen, those militias could secure Emirati influence over Hodeida and its port, similar to what took place in Aden.

A more likely scenario, however, is that Yemen will remain divided, with the Houthis controlling much of the north and the Yemeni government competing with the STC to dominate the south. The coalition’s failure to push northward and the deteriorating economic situation in the south have strengthened secessionist sentiments. Although the UAE may not necessarily support an independent southern Yemen, as this would deny it access to key facilities in the north such as Hodeida, its backing of secessionist factions would reinforce its sway over other ports and allow it to deal with Islah.

This has already begun to play out in Hadramawt Governorate. Following a [military victory over Islah in Shabwa in August 2022](#), the STC launched an offensive to capture the Islah stronghold of Seiyun. A divided Yemen gives the UAE more latitude to weaken Islah territorially and reduces the legitimacy of the internationally recognized government of which Islah is a part. Moreover, while Yemen remains disunited, the UAE faces minimal challenges to its authority over southern ports and energy facilities, giving it a strong edge in shaping the outlook for maritime trade in the region.

However, a divided Yemen will almost certainly lead to an escalation of political rifts in the south and complicate the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, especially if Abu Dhabi increases its support for the secessionist movement. An independent southern Yemen would harm the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia’s main ally, and could undermine Riyadh’s maritime ambitions. Although the kingdom has the upper hand in Mahra for now, a power struggle in southern Yemen might weaken Riyadh’s authority in the border governorate, jeopardizing Saudi control of Nishtun. The UAE has tested its relations with

Saudi Arabia on several occasions in Yemen; however, supporting an independent south Yemen may be a step too far for the Emirates as it would risk irreparable damage for the bilateral relationship.

The ongoing talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis to end the conflict are a promising step toward peace in Yemen. However, the efforts of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to expand their influence in coastal areas through support for local militias could signal a more enduring power struggle over southern Yemen.

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