

The United Arab Emirates in Yemen: From Direct to Indirect Engagement and Back

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Background

Since mid-January the Houthis' movement in Yemen, also known as Ansarullah, attacked the United Arab Emirates (UAE) four times with ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAVs, commonly known as drones). The attacks were thwarted, but one of them struck fuel trucks near Abu Dhabi international airport, setting them on fire and [killing three workers](#). The attacks were mainly on Abu Dhabi, and included targets such as the UAE's Al Dhafra air base, which also [hosts 2000 American personnel](#). One of the attacks coincided with the Israeli president's visit to the UAE. According to reports, this is not the first time the Houthis, a group that is backed by Iran, launch missiles and drones against the UAE. Although denied by the UAE, the Houthis claimed, in 2017 and 2018, that they had attempted to strike targets in the UAE [four times](#).

The Houthis warned that they will continue their attacks against the UAE until the latter ceases its military support to the Saudi-led coalition in the war in Yemen. Mohammad Abdulsalam, the Head of the Houthis' negotiation delegation in Oman [announced](#) "if the UAE does not want to be a target [of our missiles], it should not target [us with its missiles]." Yahya Sari', the spokesman of the Houthi armed forces, [tweeted](#) "Expo: with us, you may lose", advising potential participants of Expo 2020 in Dubai "to change their direction", i.e. to go elsewhere. This was intended as an implicit message that Expo 2020 could be one of the Houthis' targets in UAE. The major goal of the attacks, according to Abdul-Malik Badruldeen al-Houthi, the leader of Ansarullah, is to turn the UAE into an unsafe country for doing business. In an excerpt, which the Houthis' al-Maseera TV has continued to broadcast since the first attack on January 17th, [he says](#) "every country and every company should know that the UAE is no more a safe state." This is a real threat to the UAE business model because security is considered one of the UAE's key selling points.

This article explains why the UAE changed its strategy in the war in Yemen from direct engagement in 2015, to indirect engagement in 2019, and why this strategy was reversed back in early 2022. It also discusses Iran's connection to the Houthi attacks on the UAE, and the prospects for UAE direct engagement in the war.

From Direct to Indirect Engagement

In March 2015, a few months after the Houthis took over Yemen, the UAE sent in troops to fight against them. At the time, Saudi Arabia formed the Arab coalition and announced '[operation decisive storm](#)' to reinstall the internationally recognized government (IRG) presided by Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Four years later, in August 2019, the UAE withdrew its troops from Yemen citing the need to move from what it [called](#) then "a military-first strategy to a peace-first strategy." The real reasons behind the UAE withdrawal remain unclear, but several events occurred at the time, which likely affected their decision. The UAE withdrawal came after [armed confrontation](#) between the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC)¹ and the IRG, supported by Saudi Arabia. It also came amidst reports of economic [slowdown](#) in the UAE, which some considered a result of its engagement in the war in Yemen. In the same period, Iran shot down a [130 million USD American surveillance drone](#), and the lack of response on the part of the US to this incident is believed to have served as a strong impetus for the UAE to improve its relations with Iran. Finally, at the time of the withdrawal, the Saudis and Emiratis were enduring [growing international criticism](#) for the humanitarian cost of their air campaign in the Houthi controlled area.

¹ The STC was formed in 2017, and seeks to establish a state in south Yemen.

Indeed, “under bipartisan pressure from [the US] Congress in 2018, the Trump administration scaled back direct military support for the Gulf nations’ operations in Yemen” as reported by the Wall Street Journal ([WSJ](#)).

Whatever were the reasons for the UAE withdrawal of its troops, it remained indirectly active in the south of Yemen through the [90,000 Yemeni troops](#) that it trained, armed, and financed. These troops are [composed of](#) the Security Belt Forces, the Shabwani and Hadrami Elite Forces, the Salafi Al-amaliqa and Abu al-Abbas Brigades in Taiz, as well as armed groups formed by the STC. Whether due to a [hidden agreement](#) between the Houthis and the UAE, as some have claimed, or because the UAE-backed armed groups in south Yemen stopped fighting the Houthis, the UAE ceased its incursions.

Since the UAE withdrawal, the Houthis attacked mainly IRG troops within north Yemen provinces, expanding the areas under their control. These provinces previously formed the Yemen Arab Republic, prior to the 1990 unification with the south, then the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen. By the end of 2021, all the provinces of north Yemen were fully taken by the Houthis, except for Taiz and Maareb, where the IRG maintained partial control.

It is no secret that one of the main reasons for the failure of the Saudi-led coalition to defeat the Houthis is the fragmentation of the coalition itself. Since the UAE withdrew its forces from Yemen, [military skirmishes](#) increased between the IRG and the STC’s forces. The STC, the main political power in south Yemen, claims that Yemen’s Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated al-Islah Islamic Party is dominating the IRG, a group the UAE considers as a terrorist organization.

However, the roots of the conflict between al-Islah and the STC can be traced to three factors. First, since the unification of Yemen in 1990, the al-Islah party was the only political group that managed to establish a strong foothold in both northern and southern provinces. As such, it is perceived by the STC as an impediment to its political influence in the south. Second, the al-Islah party was founded with the blessing of colonel Ali Saleh, the former president of Yemen, and accordingly, it is viewed by the STC as an ally to Saleh’s regime. Finally, the al-Islah party calls for a united Yemen, and it was an important force that fought alongside Saleh’s regime to crush the southern forces that attempted separation in Yemen’s brief civil war in 1994. In view of this, the STC and other political forces in the south, consider the eradication of the al-Islah party from the south as essential to their goal of securing the establishment of an independent southern state in Yemen. This objective is most likely shared by the UAE, which also has [strategic security and economic interests](#) in south Yemen.

Efforts by Saudi Arabia to unite the Yemeni factions led to the ‘[Riyadh agreement](#)’ in late 2019, which aimed to end the intra-group fighting in exchange for more representation of the STC in the IRG. But these efforts did not translate into engagement of the southern military groups in the fight against the Houthis. Furthermore, in August 2020 the STC suspended its participation in the consultations in Riyadh regarding the agreement’s implementation and maintained its control on most the provinces that formed previously the state in south Yemen including Aden. In view of this, the question then arises: why did the Houthis return to target the UAE with missiles and drones?

The UAE is Back

By the end of 2021, something had changed. In February 2021, the Houthis focused their attacks on Maareb, the oil-and-gas-rich province, and the last to be fully under the control of the IRG. By October 2021, despite their heavy losses, the Houthis [took control over](#) twelve of Maareb’s fourteen districts, only Maareb’s city district, and another, remained. The Houthis’ success was in part because they managed to take control over three other districts in the Shabwa province, and used them as a bastion from which to attack the IRG’s troops in southern Maareb. In late 2019 and 2020, the Shabwa province had [witnessed fierce](#) fights between the STC and IRG military forces, leading to the IRG’s gaining control of the province. Therefore, when the Houthis attacked Shabwa, the province’s elite forces refrained from fighting alongside IRG troops against the Houthis. In fact, both al-Islah and the STC accused one another of abandoning the fight in Shabwa, leading to the fall of three of the province’s districts.

Believing that Maareb had almost fallen into their hands, the Houthis stopped their attacks, hoping to convince the remaining forces of the IRG to surrender, or to withdraw without further fight. Taking this last stronghold from the IRG with its rich oil and gas fields, amounts to a decisive victory for the Houthis. It increases their bargaining power in any peace negotiation and provides them with resources that they are desperately in need of to sustain their power.

But the Houthis were taken by surprise when, in early January 2022, the UAE-backed al-Amaliqa brigade, together with IRG forces, and with the support of the Saudi Royal Air Force, attacked the Houthis and managed to restore the three districts that they had previously lost. Although the UAE did not directly participate in the fight, the Houthis are convinced that without the UAE's green light, the al-Amaliqa brigade would not have joined the fight against them, especially since it was originally stationed on the western coast. By restoring Shabwa's districts from the Houthis, the blockade on Maareb from its southern border ended.

What contributed to the UAE's decision to engage the southern military groups in the fight against the Houthis is not fully clear, but one thing at least is known: Abu Dhabi reached an [agreement](#) with Riyadh before the engagement of the southern forces in the fight against the Houthis. It entailed replacing Mohamed Saleh bin Adiyoun, Shabwa's governor who is affiliated with the al-Islah party, with Sheikh Awad bin Alwazir al-Awlaqi, a UAE ally and a strong opponent to the al-Islah party, who was living in UAE until very recently. The agreement also enabled the new governor to replace all supporters of al-Islah party in the Shabwa's IRG institutions.

For the UAE, the agreement consolidated the control of its allies in south Yemen, which may ultimately lead to the establishment of a southern Yemeni state, as the STC wants. For Saudi Arabia, this would prevent the fall of Maareb into the hands of the Houthis, weakening the latter's position in any subsequent political negotiation.

The Houthis' loss of Shabwa's districts was a major setback in their battle to take Maareb. Accordingly, the Houthis blamed the UAE for this setback, and resumed their missiles and drones' attacks against it.

Relevance to this attack is the role played by Iran in this conflict. Iran is backing the Houthis but at the same time it has good relations with the UAE. Therefore, a legitimate question is whether the Houthis have consulted Iran before attacking the UAE.

The Iran Factor

Relations between Iran and the Houthis appear more complicated than some analysts are claiming. It is hard to believe, at least as of the current moment, that Iran has an interest in attacking the UAE. Economically, [Iran exploits](#) the UAE's ports to smuggle some of its oil shipments to China and other countries, in order to escape US economic sanctions. Furthermore, there are over [8,000 Iranian companies](#) working in the UAE, and the two countries are trade partners. Politically, relations between the two countries have improved since 2019, when the UAE held talks with Iran on maritime security. The UAE was also among the first countries to help Iran with humanitarian assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regionally, the UAE is one of the Arab countries that has [resumed relations](#) with the Syrian Assad regime, Iran's ally since the 1980's. Finally, and [according to Hezbollah](#), the Iranians told the Saudis in the ongoing bilateral negotiations between them that "they should solve their problems with the Houthis directly" because they, the Iranians, were not in a position to impose a solution on the Houthis. Against this backdrop, it is hard to believe that Iran has instructed the Houthis to target the UAE.

In fact, on al-Maseera, a Yemeni TV channel, on the program "[Samidoon](#)", the anchor, who is affiliated with the Houthis, made the following argument: "if the UAE is targeting us because we are an Iranian proxy, why they do not attack Iran as well, which they claim that it occupies part of their land [the Lesser and Greater Tunb and Abu Musa Island in the Persian/Arab Gulf]?" The anchor further noted that "when it comes to the Yemenis' lives, there are no redlines [for the Houthis]", meaning that they won't listen to anyone, including Iran.

However, there is a clear indication that the Houthis are considering Iran's interests in their attacks against the UAE. Despite their repeated claims that they have targeted Dubai in all their recent attacks, no independent sources confirmed their claims. All news reports maintained that the attacks were merely against Abu Dhabi; Dubai – where Iran has its real economic interests – had not been a target, thus far.

Prospects for Continuous UAE Engagement

Writing recently in the [WSJ](#), Yousef Al Otaiba and Lana Zaki Nusseibeh, respectively the UAE ambassador to the US and UAE's UN representative, called for the Houthis to be contained through "broad diplomatic pressure, tougher US and international sanctions, intensified efforts to block weapons proliferation, and

the development and wider deployment of effective countermeasures”, including relisting the Houthis as a terrorist organization.” While this stance shows that the UAE is willing to do what it takes to fight the Houthis should the US be willing to take those proposed measures, its policies are founded on [realpolitik](#).

News from the Lebanese Al-Akhbar newspaper, close to Hezbollah, reported that Qatar is conducting [mediation](#) between the UAE and the Houthis. Though the newspaper said that no agreement has been reached between the two sides so far, it reported that the southern military forces, al-Amaliqa, withdrew from the fight alongside IRG troops in Maareb. It also stated that the only obstacles that prevent the two sides from reaching an agreement is the lack of trust on the part of the Houthis regarding the UAE because “an agreement was there in the past between both sides, but the UAE violated it.” Therefore, the Houthis are demanding guarantees that the UAE-backed southern military groups won’t support the IRG’s forces in the future. In fact, they are asking the UAE to stop its financial and military support to those armed groups.

Having invested enormous resources in creating and supporting the southern military groups, the UAE will most likely refuse the Houthis’ demand. A more realistic outcome of the mediation would be an agreement between the two sides with no guarantees, but one that allows the UAE to return to its indirect engagement and gives the Houthis a reason to stop their attacks on the UAE. This might be possible if the southern military groups cease backing IRG troops in their fight against the Houthis. Such an agreement, would allow the Houthis to consolidate their grip on the north of Yemen, with the southern military groups maintaining control over the country’s south. While this may lead to a rift between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, for the former it would mean a return to its 2019 position when it declared a withdrawal from Yemen, but only did so after consolidating its power in the southern province Shabwa, now under the full control of its southern allies.

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