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“Miss Me Yet?” What the UAE Drawdown Means For the United States and UN in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

At the end of June, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) used a combination of leaks and statements to communicate that it was beginning to fold its large military intervention in support of the internationally-recognized—if rather undeserving—government of Yemen.

With the UAE only just having signaled its intention to drawdown in Yemen, it may be a little too soon for them to ask stakeholders in Yemen’s stability “miss me yet?” Even so, I am betting that one day the international community will miss the UAE’s military mission in Yemen, which I have had multiple chances to observe up close over the last year.

The UAE’s current intention to limit its military involvement means that the UAE’s small mission in the city of Marib is almost completely gone, the frontline “advise, assist, and accompany” battlegroup at the Red Sea port of Hodeida is leaving, and the large stabilization battlegroup in the Hadi government’s temporary capital of Aden is also going home.

What the UAE’s drawdown does not mean is that the tough fight against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is over. The UAE special operations task force will continue working alongside Yemeni and international allies in south-central and eastern Yemen as long as is required. Meanwhile, a sizable rapid reaction capability within striking distance will nominally remain at a high level of readiness to respond to any Houthi rebel effort to expand their area of control, as they did when they overran the Yemeni capital of Sana’a in 2014 and tried to seize the rest of the country in 2015.

However, though the UAE might be leaving with the intention to return if needed and is planning on providing support from afar, there is no substitute for “being there,” every day and in strength. Hardly anyone understands just how much daily crisis management and stabilization work the UAE forces have done in Yemen. And while a

drawdown was inevitable—no country the size of the UAE can permanently maintain the country’s current three large battlegroups and many smaller detachments in Yemen—withdrawing so much support at such an early point in the stabilization of the country risks losing what stabilization the UAE and local forces have so far been able to achieve.

The UAE’s drawdown thus has a number of possible consequences for the counter-terrorism fight, the humanitarian situation, the UN peace process, and the military balance inside Yemen. In short, the situation in Yemen may well be worsened by this withdrawal, and ultimately leaves the United States and the UN with more to do to stabilize Yemen. These outcomes might prompt reflection in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere about the net value of driving this U.S. partner out of the Yemen war with a shaming campaign that focused only on the negatives of UAE involvement.

A Personal View on the UAE in Yemen

For the last fifteen years, I have watched the UAE military grow from a small constabulary force to one of America’s most potent and impressive military partners. Given these developments, I was keen to see these forces operate on the ground in Yemen. I did this by visiting their command centers, patrols, community engagements, and battle areas.

Whenever an observer embeds with combatant forces, they inevitably lose some of their objectivity. The ideal observer of a conflict would embed with both sides, but this is almost never possible and is extraordinarily dangerous—think embedding with the Islamic State or even the anti-Western, Saudi-bombed Houthis.

In my case, however, embedding did not shape my view. I came to Yemen with an already-formed ideological conviction that the war to prevent a Houthi takeover of Yemen was a war worth fighting. While many observers see the Yemen conflict as a cut-and-dried case study of Saudi Arabian adventurism against wronged northern Yemeni tribes, I never saw it like that. In my view, the Houthi seizure of the Yemeni capital in 2014 was wrong and destabilizing, and the UN-backed Yemeni government’s 2015 call for military aid to its self-defense was reasonable. The Saudi-led Gulf coalition’s resolve and rapid mobilization were, to me, commendable.

Though much of Saudi Arabia’s execution of the war effort proved lamentable and self-defeating, I could not say the same for the UAE, which has conducted itself with professionalism and determination. Having come through the experience of U.S. occupation in Iraq, I did not expect the Emirates to be perfect or avoid all the pitfalls of a complex stabilization operation—but they far exceeded my expectations.

What the UAE Did

Few people understand the inside story of the UAE war effort in Yemen. In particular, what is often lost is the way the country entered the war with the intent of playing a small role but ended up running every successful front in the conflict. After launching a daring amphibious and special operations campaign to prevent the Houthis from taking over Yemen’s second largest city Aden, the Emirates then answered a Saudi call for help to likewise prevent the Houthi seizure of Yemen’s main oil and gas hub at Marib. This was achieved with élan.

Though the Emirates could simply have shut down their anti-AQAP effort until the Houthis were defeated—as Saudi Arabia effectively did—they instead successfully undertook a major campaign to roll back AQAP’s nascent caliphate based on the large port of Mukalla. The campaign was conducted in parallel to the anti-Houthi effort, doubling the military tasks facing the UAE military.

Then, when Saudi Arabia proved unwilling to mount a major operation to choke off the Houthi access to the sea, before the UAE again stepped forward and liberated hundreds of miles of coastline, driving the Houthis into a UN-mediated joint custody of the Red Sea ports.

The UAE’s Stabilization Role

In parallel to its combat operations, the UAE's battlegroups and the Emirates Red Cross have played a prominent role in supporting governance, service provision, economic stabilization, infrastructure support, and law enforcement.

The UAE trained and equipped around 50,000 local forces, who acquitted themselves with impressive professionalism and determination while under the close supervision of Emirati troops. The UAE brokered very successful local security arrangements by sitting literally every evening with local stakeholders and ironing out local difficulties. To my amazement, urban gun control schemes even started to emerge in Yemeni towns. A commitment to local engagement made the UAE especially good at undermining AQAP and, where necessary, helping the United States effectively target terrorist enclaves with its droning program.

Where the UAE battlegroups operated, economic stabilization efforts put emphasis on self-sustaining projects that "bought local" instead of distorting local economies through imported goods. UAE efforts demonstrated an eye for detail: if fishing was the local economy, the UAE would make an ice factory, the one piece of the puzzle that the fishermen were missing. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a stabilization force entirely made up of Arabic speakers, often with prior personal and tribal connections into southern Yemen, proved to be quite good at fostering local connections that had major benefits for Yemenis in the surrounding areas.

Implications of a UAE Drawdown

Despite these impressive on-the-ground successes, the U.S. Congress has long viewed the UAE as part of the problem in Yemen, not the solution. In time, I think this view may come to be recognized as shortsighted and self-defeating. But in the near-term, the likelihood of a major UAE drawdown leaves the United States and the UN with some serious potential shortfalls.

Reduced Counter-Terrorism Efficiency: Though the UAE will maintain a special operations task force to continue pursuing AQAP into the highlands of Abyan, there will naturally be a decline in the effectiveness of UAE relationships at the local level. The huge role played by UAE forces across Yemen confirmed them as a solid ally with an apparently open-ended commitment to helping the affected regions stabilize. This attitude is worth its weight in gold within communities that must ask: "If I side with the UAE against Al-Qaeda today, will they still be with me tomorrow?" With less robust capabilities, it will now be harder for the UAE to maintain local trust.

It is quite probable that a UAE drawdown at the national level will mean that the UAE will need to work harder at local level to keep up the successful anti-AQAP campaign. The less impact the UAE has, the harder it will be for U.S. Joint Special Operations Command to find the right targets inside Yemen.

The question of local stability and trust is of particular concern in Southern Yemen. Southern areas like Hadramaut, Shabwah, Aden, and the Red Sea coast have been stable largely because of the constant UAE mediation and refereeing between armed factions that do not necessarily share goals outside of fighting Houthi forces. Now, the UAE must depart before deep-rooted stability and local governance have had the time to develop.

One can already see the negative effects in areas like Shabwah, where the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) operates alongside Hadi government forces. Far from encouraging secessionism, the UAE was a moderating influence on the STC in order to maximize stability and prioritize the anti-AQAP and anti-Houthi fights. Now the STC is arming up as rapidly as it can in anticipation of the UAE withdrawal and a clash with the Yemeni government.

Months ago, there would have been no way for successive days-long bouts of fighting to break out between these two forces. UAE officers would have knocked heads together, soothed egos, and brokered deals—all with the weight of drones, fighter jets, and armored vehicles. Now, Shabwah province's capital Ataq is wracked by fighting, broken only by fragile local ceasefires. Without an effective outside mediator, more of this is to come.

Handicapping the UN Peace Process: Far from the carping of Congressional press conferences, where the UAE military campaign was vilified, UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths well understood that the UAE's offensive capabilities could be used as a potent "bad cop" threat to bring the Houthis into an internationally-mediated peace deal. The Houthis have little incentive to enter talks other than the risk of military defeat, and the UAE provided enough pressure to bring Houthi negotiators to the table.

Now that risk is effectively gone. Saudi Arabia can prevent peace from breaking out and can bleed the Houthis on a never-ending northern front, but only the UAE had the military potency and local allied forces to credibly threaten defeat for the Houthis.

Thus, if the U.S. Congress wants to end the war and avoid full famine, as opposed to simply punishing Saudi Arabia and generating self-righteous soundbites, it should not be happy with the UAE withdrawal. An important arrow has now been removed from the UN's quiver and cannot be easily replaced. New incentives for Houthi involvement in the peace process need to be crafted, which will take significant additional time and effort from the international community.

Just as important, the international community needs to signal that the Houthis will not be allowed to overrun other parts of Yemen now that the military balance has shifted again. Until the UAE intervention, the Houthis seized more and more of Yemen in 2014 and 2015. Only UAE-backed defensive actions stopped the Houthis and rolled them back at Aden and Marib. Will the UN and the United States now prevent Houthi re-expansion?

The Houthis could easily advance again, especially later in the year when the UAE has fully drawn down and the Houthis have had time to prepare. No one in Washington or at the UN should presume that the current battle lines are fixed. They could easily move in the Houthis' favor, with disastrous effects for the UN peace process.

The United States' Increased Responsibility

Much will be lost with the UAE's withdrawal from Yemen, and the United States needs to think hard about the new risks, requirements, and costs this will generate. The removal of UAE military power in Yemen will have the effect of "taking the safety catch off" in local stability in southern Yemen and will make a recovery by the Houthis and AQAP more likely. Local crises in Yemen will now become more frequent and more consequential.

The United States should also ponder its treatment of a partner who took U.S. concerns about "free-loading" allies to heart. The UAE stepped up to the challenge it perceived instead of looking to America to do all the heavy lifting and pay all the costs. Will the UAE—or other prospective partners—make that mistake again?

The United States has spent decades on the receiving end of criticism from powers who were not themselves contributing to security. However, the United States also needs to recognize that it cannot both abdicate leadership and criticize others who, armed and trained by the United States, then act in the vacuum left by an absentee superpower. ❖



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