

# UAE Drawdown May Isolate Saudi Arabia in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

**The war-fatigued Emiratis appear to be leaving Riyadh to fend for itself in the fight against Iranian-backed rebels, underlining the necessity of Saudi-Houthi talks.**

**M**ilitary leaders in the United Arab Emirates often say that their motto is “Fix a problem or get out.” In their view, the worst option is to linger and risk getting stuck in a quagmire when conditions prevent a military solution. Ever since the Houthi rebels were largely driven from south Yemen two years ago, the UAE’s primary battle with the Iranian-backed group has occurred in Hodeida, a western province along the Red Sea. With major fighting there halted while the UN focuses on negotiations, the Emiratis view their continued presence in Yemen as just the kind of lingering they like to avoid. As such, they have begun to deliberately draw down their forces in much of the country, excepting their counterterrorism forces.

Abu Dhabi is unlikely to announce this departure in any official terms given sensitivities with its neighbor and coalition partner Saudi Arabia, which are heightened after recent attacks on the kingdom’s critical infrastructure, including pipelines and an airport. But several Emirati officials have privately and proactively declared it.

## WHERE IS THE DRAWDOWN OCCURRING?

**U**AE sources claim that Emirati units are almost 100 percent out of Marib, 80 percent out of Hodeida, and beginning to withdraw from Aden, leaving local oversight to the Yemeni forces they have trained (i.e., the Security Belt and the Elite Forces). Yemeni sources confirm at least part of the Aden drawdown. Similarly, Emirati staff in the key forward operating base of Assab, Eritrea, have declined by about 75 percent in the past two months, including personnel who trained Yemeni forces.

The drawdown is not obvious in some areas; for example, Yemeni sources claim that no withdrawal is apparent in Shabwa province, where fighting persists over the oil districts of Bayhan. Moreover, UAE-funded mercenaries, including at least 10,000 Sudanese fighters supported out of the Assab base, will remain on hand to back Yemen's military. Perhaps most important, UAE forces will continue running counterterrorism operations out of their base in al-Mukalla, the city they liberated from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in 2016.

## STRATEGIC SHIFT

The drawdown has been occurring quietly for months and is not the result of the recent uptick in Iranian and Houthi-led attacks in the Gulf region, some of which have targeted UAE interests. Instead, it appears to have been triggered at least in part by the December 2018 [Stockholm Agreement](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-hodeida-redeployment-plan-a-slow-start-in-yemen) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-hodeida-redeployment-plan-a-slow-start-in-yemen>), which shifted the focus in Hodeida province from a military solution to a negotiated solution.

Leaving the Houthi fight and concentrating on the counterterrorism mission fits with the UAE's more limited sense of its role in Yemen. Abu Dhabi's goals have been to push the rebels out of the south, counter terrorist activity by AQAP and other actors, and train local forces to take over both roles. Indeed, the Houthis were pushed out of the south by 2017 and have largely stayed out. The UAE has also partnered with the United States and Yemen to create a difficult operating environment for AQAP, keeping the group degraded by continuing counterterrorism operations in provinces such as al-Bayda and Abyan. Emirati authorities now contend that the local forces they have trained are capable of providing security on their own, except perhaps in the realm of counterterrorism, where Abu Dhabi says they will remain involved.

In short, the UAE argues that its drawdown is not just because of war fatigue, but also because its mission is largely complete in the south, and the conflict with the Houthis is now in the hands of UN negotiators rather than coalition military forces. Outside observers are often less generous in their view of the UAE's decisions and efforts, however. One former U.S. diplomat with experience in the region suggested that the drawdown is more likely a "reluctant but stonily pragmatic recognition that they cannot sustain—militarily, financially, and most important politically—any longer at the current state of bloody impasse." Meanwhile, U.S. military specialists with ground experience in Yemen are not optimistic about the capabilities of local forces. Many also worry that Emirati military trainers have essentially created a pro-southern independence military force that is not under the Yemeni government's control, a situation that could lead to future conflict in the south.

## FRICION WITH THE SAUDIS

The UAE's decision is almost certainly causing tension with Riyadh, which must now rethink its own approach to the war. Previously, the Emiratis swallowed their war fatigue and stayed the course in order to maintain a united front with the Saudis. That mindset was in line with standard cultural predispositions about fealty but seems to have changed for one reason or another, threatening to expose rifts and create additional tension during a time of heightened sensitivity in the Gulf. U.S. officials should engage actively with both parties and the Yemeni government to help formulate an agreed way forward and ward off any potential long-term Emirati-Saudi disputes.

Such a rift between the two Gulf partners would be concerning, but not surprising. Despite maintaining a common public face, their forces in Yemen generally do not operate in tandem, instead splitting their responsibilities. The Saudis usually run operations in the north while the Emiratis run operations in the south, and when one enters the opposite zone, the other leaves. For example, when the Emiratis took over operations in Hodeida province, the Saudis drew down to a token presence; when the Saudis entered al-Mahra province, the Emiratis left. Even the presence of liaison officers in each other's units often seems token. The fact that the two forces do not often cross paths appears intentional, raising questions about Emirati views of Saudi military competence.

Similarly, while Abu Dhabi and Riyadh share the same general view of regional threats, they have prioritized those threats differently, including in Yemen. For example, the UAE puts more emphasis on fighting the Muslim Brotherhood than Saudi Arabia does, and appears less concerned about empowering southern separatists. They have also dealt with the Iranian threat differently outside Yemen, with Riyadh squarely blaming Tehran for [recent shipping attacks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-seems-prepared-for-major-but-measured-escalation-in-the-gulf\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-seems-prepared-for-major-but-measured-escalation-in-the-gulf) and the UAE demurring from direct accusations.

If their united public face starts to wither, longstanding differences between the two governments may be exacerbated. The United States should therefore work with its Gulf allies more actively to ensure that such differences do not create additional problems, whether in resolving the Yemen conflict or opposing Iran's destabilizing activity elsewhere in the region.

## WHAT NEXT FOR YEMEN?

It has long been apparent that a solution in Yemen is more likely to be attained through a political process than a military one, especially with the U.S. Congress intensifying pressure in that direction and the UAE drawing down. Riyadh's military limitations mean that a political solution may now be the only option. The Saudis cannot claim significant success in their military objectives. Their border remains compromised by the Houthis, while their forces have failed to retake the capital on behalf of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and the internationally recognized Yemeni government. Going forward, the UAE's willingness to continue supporting Saudi-led airstrikes and other northern military activity is unclear.

If the Saudis do not pursue a political solution more proactively, they risk being left on their own to fight a war they cannot win. A UAE drawdown amid continued Saudi airstrikes may be the worst option, as the Houthis may see it as an opportunity to test the readiness of Yemeni forces in the south. In contrast, a joint Saudi-UAE drawdown could create space for bilateral Saudi-Houthi de-escalation talks, perhaps removing the rebels' underlying reason for attacking the Saudi homeland in the longer term regardless of whether Iran keeps urging them to do so.

As such, the United States should push Riyadh to consider reopening direct talks with the Houthis similar to those held in 2016, while finding ways to make such negotiations acceptable to the Hadi government. Washington should also encourage the UN process and foster direct Hadi-Houthi talks, with the aim of finding a solution for the whole country, not just Hodeida. The UN special envoy will remain hamstrung if the parties do not engage with one another more vigorously. Bilateral talks are not a sign of giving in to the Houthis, but rather a fast-diminishing opportunity to limit Iranian influence in Yemen and stabilize the country. With war fatigue growing, proactive engagement that seeks mutually beneficial arrangements for all parties is a face-saving way out of the conflict.

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