

Iran and UAE in Yemen:

Regional and Global Ambitions

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the actions and goals of two major actors in Yemen: Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Framed within the context of the Yemeni Civil War, both states have used the fog of war to further their own regional and global interests. Moreover, some of their interests—and the strategies through which they seek to achieve them—contradict the United States' goals in Yemen, the region, and the international stage. As such, if the United States wishes to strengthen its credibility in the Persian Gulf, it needs to critically reevaluate its strategy in the region and pay more attention to the behavior of its allies.

INTRODUCTION

The narrow lens of the United States' foreign policy in the Persian Gulf is evident when examining the civil war in Yemen. Currently, the United States is involved in the conflict through its support for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition against the Houthi rebels. While this approach allows the United States to maintain influence, monitor interests, and limit its physical engagement, it also allows other actors to easily implement policies that contradict the U.S. foreign policy goals.

Both Iran and the United Arab Emirates are involved in the civil war, but their behavior suggests motives that transcend the conflict. As part of the Saudi-led coalition, the UAE has committed a significant number of ground troops to the conflict. Though indirectly benefiting from the U.S. support for Saudi

Arabia, the UAE has used the conflict to further its own regional ambitions. Iran, which is backing the Houthi rebels, seeks to achieve its objectives without becoming entangled in the conflict, similar to the United States. Both states use the fog of war to advance their respective hidden agendas and attempt to profit from the United States' indirect engagement in the Yemeni Civil War.

This article begins by examining the actions of the UAE and Iran in Yemen. It then explains how these actions relate to their global and/or regional ambitions and run counter to broader U.S. interests. The article ends by presenting policy recommendations for reframing the U.S. strategy in the region. The prescriptions assume that the U.S. engagement in the Persian Gulf will remain similar to present levels.

IRAN

The civil war in Yemen is an example of Iran strategically positioning itself in another proxy conflict against its regional rival Saudi Arabia – within the context of Iran's regional ambitions and strategies. Iran has sponsored groups like Hizballah and Hamas against Israel, Shia paramilitaries against the United States in Iraq, and has used proxies to bolster the Assad regime throughout the civil war in Syria. Through this strategy, Iran imposes military pressure on its rivals without becoming directly involved, reducing the risk of a direct military conflict. Iran remains in the background, supporting tactics that disrupt U.S., Israeli, or Saudi strategy and bog down rivals in low-intensity but long-term military engagements.

In Yemen, Iran provides financial and material support to the Houthi rebels in their fight against the Saudi coalition-backed Hadi government. Iran's support has prolonged the conflict, exacerbated the related humanitarian crisis, and endorsed the Houthis' violations of international humanitarian laws.¹ Furthermore, Iran's material aid allows the Houthis to maintain a steady missile campaign into Saudi Arabia and, as some disputed claims suggest, the UAE.

However, it is possible that Iran is not necessarily seeking a decisive victory for Houthis in Yemen. Rather, it may be intentionally exacerbating yet another drain on U.S. and Saudi resources, military capabilities, and political capital.² By supporting the group, Iran not only has a proxy on Saudi Arabia's southern border. Iran's involvement in itself drives the Saudis and their regional allies, as well as the United States, to deepen their engagement in the conflict and expend significant economic and military resources to eliminate Iranian influence. As one component of a broader Iranian destabilization strategy, the United States must recognize that the continuation of the civil war is of Iran's advantage.

Recognizing Iran's broader strategy further demands that the United States should expect Iran to use the same strategy in other conflict environments.

While testifying at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on the U.S. policy in Yemen, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs at the Department of Defense, Robert S. Karem, stated that Iran has “exploited” the chaotic situation in the country as a “test bed” for destabilization operations.³ This phrasing suggests that, given the opportunity, Iran will attempt to use this strategy again. It is important to note that Iran’s modus operandi does not involve creating the instability but rather capitalizing on pre-existing and/or nascent conflicts for its own political ends.

In the Persian Gulf, Iraq is a suitable example of how Iran’s strategy is predicated on opportunity. The fragile balance between U.S. and Iranian influence in the country is complicated by internal instability produced by the Islamic State in the West and the Kurdish regional government in the East.⁴ Concerns surrounding the Iran-backed Shia paramilitary groups, known as Popular Mobilization Units, continue to emerge, even as political elements the group came in second in Iraq’s most recent elections.⁵

However, the United States must be mindful that Iran thrives on instability and utilizes chaos to its advantage, suggesting that directly engaging with these proxies will have negative repercussions for the United States in the region and generate conflict in the domestic political sphere. Iran’s ability to capitalize on instability and prolong its disruptive symptoms can provoke the United States to become entangled in an increasingly deteriorating situation. The United States’ determination to intervene is actually increased by Iranian involvement, rather than understood as a signal to focus all energies on re-stabilization.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The UAE is pursuing multiple objectives in Yemen that affect the United States at regional and global levels. These include its counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), cultivation of a sphere of influence in southern Yemen and the Horn of Africa, and use of economic restrictions to inhibit Oman’s neutrality in the region. The Emiratis’ commitment to the Saudi coalition provides them justification for stationing ground troops in Yemen and provides them a forward platform for achieving other regional ambitions.

Though the UAE is primarily involved in operations against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, it has also reclaimed villages and territory from AQAP forces. The civil war adds another layer of complexity as AQAP is also fighting the Houthis. However, the nature of UAE’s operations against AQAP and its lenient approach towards the fighters have raised significant concerns.⁶ Multiple reports have stated that Emirati soldiers have avoided open conflict with AQAP, for example by allowing them to leave contested areas with their weapons and loot.⁷ Furthermore, AQAP deserters have been recruited by Emirati forces and

have been used to encourage their former peers to do the same.⁸ Apart from reducing casualties, maintaining control over strategic positions in Yemen is one of the primary reasons that the UAE is avoiding direct conflict with AQAP when possible. In at least one instance, the UAE and AQAP were forced to passively respect each other's strategic positions in order to defeat the common enemy.⁹ Despite these complexities, an ally's leniency towards AQAP should not be acceptable to the United States

The second component of the Emirati strategy concerns its development of southern Yemen as a foothold from which it can further expand its sphere of influence into the Horn of Africa. By preserving the infrastructure and port access, the UAE can maintain a forward presence in Yemen and has the opportunity to foster friendly relations with the country leadership to cement its influence in the region.

The UAE's presence in the Horn of Africa has mutually benefited the UAE and elites in Eritrea and Somaliland, both politically and economically. The UAE has provided at least \$3 billion in economic aid to Ethiopia and has military installations in both Eritrea and Somaliland.¹⁰ In addition, in 2018, the UAE helped start the dialogue that led to the recent rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea.¹¹ While these developments are critical to the Emirati role in the region and its operations in Yemen, they also signal the UAE's desire to protect its food imports from the Horn of Africa.¹²

To reframe this information in the context of Yemen, the UAE's ambitions go beyond ending the civil war and defeating Houthis and AQAP. It is likely that the UAE will want to remain in Yemen even after a resolution to the conflict to ensure its interests in the Horn of Africa.

The UAE has also used its presence in Yemen to impose military pressure on Oman, in conjunction with economic efforts to constrain Oman's traditional, diplomatic neutrality. As a historic mediator between Persian Gulf states, Oman could play a key role in de-escalating the conflict, which might prevent the UAE from furthering its goals in Yemen and stymying its growing sphere of influence. Oman's geographical, political, and tribal ties to Yemen, as well as its known track record of enabling mediation between states, suggest that it may be the only Gulf Cooperation Council state to successfully bring all participants in the Yemeni Civil War to the negotiating table.¹³ However, Oman also has a strong relationship with Iran, and stands accused by Saudi Arabia and the UAE of allowing Iranian arms and resources to travel across its border into Yemen.¹⁴

The UAE has used its position in Yemen to augment a strategy that actively hinders the Oman's neutrality. The UAE has expanded its ground presence near the Yemen-Oman border and in southern Yemeni ports, thereby strengthening its military posture against Oman. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have collaborated together to weaken Oman's economy—by allegedly

delaying business and investment deals and increased bureaucratic transaction costs on trade and border crossings. Moreover, the UAE is heavily investing in Oman's Batinah coast and the Musandam Peninsula, suggesting an intent to "strategically encircle" the country and reduce its economic independence.¹⁵ Through economic and military means, UAE may successfully disrupt the Oman's historical commitment to neutrality and eliminate a potential broker of peace.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

While both Iran and the UAE are participating in the ongoing conflict in Yemen, neither appears to be fully committed to ending it. Both benefit from the war and, more broadly, the instability that stems from it. Iran is implementing a well-rehearsed strategy to weaken the Saudis and their allies - including the United States - by perpetuating the conflict. Likewise, the UAE is using the civil war and the pretense of the global war on terror to expand its influence in Yemen and the Horn of Africa, as well as to put political pressure on Oman, reducing its ability to resolve the civil war or mediate with Iran.

In a broader sense, the United States must reconsider its alliance with Saudi Arabia, which assumes that it will serve as a U.S. foreign policy proxy in the region. The Saudi-led coalition is only prolonging the conflict and damaging the United States' regional and global reputation. In Yemen, the alliance has associated the United States with a humanitarian crisis and countless human rights violations, all in the name of countering Iranian influence. Moreover, the determination of the United States to oppose Iran in the region creates further complications, as it galvanizes Saudi Arabia in its actions, perpetuates military competition, and prohibits peace in the region.

The United States must use its status in the region -- as a formidable power independent of Saudi Arabia -- to enforce the rules of diplomacy and hold all sides accountable. As such, the United States should advocate for Houthi representation in any political settlement in Yemen. While some will view this strategy as supporting the Iranian agenda in Yemen, in actuality it will reduce Iran's influence over the Houthis, and through increasing the prospects of peace, deny Iran space for political warfare against Saudi Arabia and the United States.

In a similar vein, the United States must ensure the neutrality of Oman as it faces hostility from Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Oman's historic position as an intermediary has played a crucial role in U.S. foreign policy before, such as when Oman facilitated the dialogue that led to the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. Furthermore, the United States may benefit from the state's neutrality in the future, as it is essentially an institution of conflict resolution in the Persian Gulf. The United States must use its close

ties with the Saudis and the Emiratis to stop them from targeting Oman and use its own economic and military might to shore up Oman's resilience against external pressure.

Regardless of when the civil war ends, the United States must immediately clamp down on the UAE's leniency towards members of AQAP. At the very least, the United States must advocate for the UAE to confiscate the arms of retreating AQAP militias, reducing their ability to commit violent acts in the future. The United States should launch a full investigation into the practices of Emirati counterterrorism operations to determine whether their efforts are actually centered on eliminating the threat or if they are prioritizing UAE interests. If the investigation reveals the latter as the truth, it is another reason for the United States to cut funding and support for coalition operations.

In conclusion, the United States must support efforts to deescalate the conflict in Yemen, which will reduce Iran and the UAE's abilities to capitalize on the instability in the country. This means supporting the United Nations-brokered Stockholm Agreement reached on December 13, 2018 and advocating for further dialogue between all parties.¹⁶ In perpetuating the conflict, the United States only creates more room for Iran and the UAE to develop their interests under the cover of war.

ENDNOTES

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