

Implications of the Saudi-UAE Differences for Yemen's Peace Process

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Overview

Saudi-UAE relations have always been complex, and are marked by [fluctuations and disagreements](#). Fluctuating between cooperation and conflict, relations between the two countries have always been governed by border issues, competition and even jealousy. As far as the Yemeni issue is concerned, disagreements between the two countries revolve around competition for influence and the gains of war. These differences came to the surface when the UAE redefined its strategy in Yemen in 2019, announcing the end of its military involvement in the Saudi-led coalition after it controlled important seaports and several Yemeni islands, and following its formation of armed groups loyal to Abu Dhabi. This transformation was not only a violation of the requirements of the alliance of the two countries, but is also at odds with Saudi interests.

How do differences affect peace?

As far as the peace process is concerned, the two countries agree on ending the war and reaching peace in Yemen. The UAE [shows its support](#) for peace efforts, including Saudi efforts and negotiations with the Houthi group. However, other minor issues under this goal are an arena of disagreement between the two countries. Since differences between the two Gulf states revolve around competition and influence, they espouse [divergent](#) views of the future of Yemen. Therefore, their differences influence the peace process, which will eventually determine the political nature of Yemen in the future, and will draw the map of post-war interests and influence.

The UAE ambitions and policies in Yemen account for the dissatisfaction of Saudi Arabia, which views them not merely as incompatible with its interests, but also as subversive of its efforts to end the conflict. The UAE persistent backing of the secessionist drive in the south is a case in point. According to media reports, [Saudi Crown Prince](#), Mohammed bin Salman, asked the UAE to stop interfering in the ceasefire talks led by his country. The UAE insistence and adherence to the same positions and policies continue to embarrass Riyadh and betray its inability to control the behavior of its ally.

On the other hand, the UAE is annoyed by Saudi Arabia's efforts to expand its presence and influence in the southern and eastern Yemeni provinces. Abu Dhabi is frustrated and annoyed by the pressure placed on its allies. It is also frustrated with and worried about its exclusion from the talks with the Houthis in Riyadh. The more progress in these talks, the [more concerned it grows](#). Generally, Abu Dhabi believes that Riyadh does not take UAE interests (or the interests of its Gulf neighbors) into account and prefers instead to proceed in a zero-sum game.

Factors of escalation and chances of de-escalation

Some observers believe that differences between the two countries will probably continue, perhaps even escalate. They build their conclusions on several factors and evidence, the most important of which are:

- The clash of personalities involving the charismatic Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and the stubborn and ambitious UAE president, Mohammed bin Zayed. This clash has contributed to delaying the resolution of many disputed issues.
- The serious and sensitive nature of disputed issues and the divergent positions of the two countries: While the Saudi position is mainly based on considerations of national security, the UAE focuses mainly on geo-economic interests.
- The huge UAE investments and gains that are threatened by the expansion of Saudi influence makes giving up or neglecting those gains more difficult.

On the other hand, several political and economic considerations seem to push towards de-escalation and containing differences, including the following:

- The mutual economic inter-dependence of the two countries: Saudi Arabia is an important market of Emirati products and is considered the top investor in the UAE. This factor constitutes an incentive for both countries to maintain stable economic relations.
- The crucial regional and international role played by the two countries: Both countries realize that any tensions between them will negatively affect their positions as well as the stability of the entire region. Therefore, they seek to maintain regional balance and to ease tensions in the region.
- US efforts to limit these differences to a minimum: These efforts are not only driven by attempts to prevent tension between two US allies, but also by the fact that their agreement and limiting their differences are vital to the peace process in Yemen. The US is concerned that such differences will lead to thwarting efforts to end the war, which is a goal the US has pledged to achieve and views it as a US responsibility and political commitment. The US is also concerned that these differences will play into the hands of Iran.
- The two countries also disagree on other issues of varying significance. This provides them with the opportunity to bargain over the Yemeni file, and allows each one of them to make concessions to the other on key issues of interest.

The history of relations between the two countries shows that they have sought to avoid further deterioration and hence a rupture in their relations. Despite their continual differences and rivalry, they both kept things under control. In the Yemeni case, this is reflected in their avoidance of any public reference to their differences. Such differences are even denied by officials on both sides. This mutual care prevents the expansion of the disagreements, supports their interests and reputation, and strengthens the GCC. This is a good ground for optimism, especially as the two countries have previously succeeded in overcoming their differences, as demonstrated by their mutual effort of the formation of the Presidential Leadership Council.

Impact of the disagreement on the peace process

It is important to note at the outset that identifying the exact positions of the two countries towards the unity of Yemen is a key to understanding the repercussions of their divergent positions over the peace process in Yemen. UAE positions and policies indicate that it supports the secession of the south. It is also likely that it will accept a less radical outcome provided that its interests are secured. The Saudis, at least at the present stage, view a divided Yemen as a threat to regional security, even though the ambiguity surrounding the future of Yemen is the norm.

If Saudi Arabia supports the unity of Yemen on the basis that it is a better and less costly way of preserving its interests and enhancing its influence, its differences with the UAE in this case are in the interest of the peace process, even if it creates some obstacles on the way. But if Riyadh is only concerned with Yemen within the framework of its interests, it may resort to sharing influence with the UAE and partitioning the country into two parts (north and south) or to multiple states (north, south and east). This will certainly be reflected in the security of the region and will threaten the whole peace process because reaching sustainable peace is impossible in a partitioned Yemen.

Differences between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi complicate the Yemeni scene, and affect the peace process. Some repercussions of their differences are already noticeable today, but most of those outcomes are still likely to occur, and their occurrence depends on the trajectory that these differences will take. The more radical the differences, the greater risks and challenges they pose to the peace process, and vice versa.

The fact that up to this moment there is no consensus on a roadmap for peace raises the impact of these differences and causes additional complications in the way of peace. There are many issues that still have to be agreed upon, and this leaves a wide margin for influencing the peace process.

The division of the components of the Yemeni legitimacy in their loyalty between Saudi Arabia and the UAE is mirrored in the divisions in Yemeni [political institutions](#). Such a division is another factor that increases the chances of influencing the peace process. The potential challenges and even threats that these differences pose to the peace process are as follows:

- The threat to end the fragile truce and thwarting the efforts of transforming it into a permanent ceasefire.
- Slowing down the pace of peace efforts and delaying comprehensive and conclusive negotiations.
- Reducing the chances of reaching a comprehensive and sustainable peace and contributing to incomplete and distorted peace agreements.
- Stopping and paralyzing the peace process.

The following are the most important contexts through which Saudi-UAE differences can affect the peace process and the key outcomes that might result from them:

1. Boosting a peace-unfriendly division

These differences reinforce the divisions of the parties to the conflict between the two countries, which makes them susceptible to internalizing the differences and adopting the positions of their supporters. These differences will also weaken the political and administrative efficiency of political institutions and hamper them from playing an effective role in the planning and negotiations of peace. All of this will negatively affect the path of peace. For example, smooth discussions, goodwill and understanding among stakeholders will be difficult, and thus it will not be easy to reach the necessary consensus.

As a result of these differences and to counterbalance the influence of the UAE and its allies who demand secession, Saudi Arabia has [established military formations](#) loyal to it. It also established the Hadramout National Council as a representative entity entrusted with running the affairs and safeguarding the interests of the province. The aim was to foil the plans of the STC, limit its influence and prevent it from controlling this key governorate. Similar councils will probably be [established](#) in other provinces, particularly in Aden. This further complicates the Yemeni scene as new actors emerge. Although such solutions may seem to address some issues, they add new complications to the peace process. In addition to the subsequent reaction by the UAE and its allies, creating more provincial councils is essentially problematic— as is the case with regional and sectarian councils generally— since they enhance the most local political aspirations and tendencies. Peace and negotiations will have to deal with a greater number of actors and take their positions, opinions and interests into account.

2. Undermining confidence in the peace process

In addition to mutual suspicions and mistrust they give rise to among the Yemeni parties, Saudi-UAE differences undermine the confidence of the UAE and its allies in the Houthi-Saudi negotiations and in any outcomes of those bilateral talks. Most probably, Abu Dhabi will reject any agreements between the two parties in the final peace negotiations if it finds that they harm its interests or fail to take them into account. The UAE will push its allies to not to participate in those negotiations, and perhaps to opt for a military solution and a return of the war.

3. Influencing the Choices of the Yemeni parties

UAE-Saudi differences encourage the parties to the conflict in Yemen to adopt peace-unfriendly positions and policies. Besides, it puts them in a stronger negotiating position. For example, these differences tempt the Houthis to delay negotiations with Saudi Arabia until relations between the two Gulf allies and by extension their proxies get worse. The sharper the disagreements, the more concessions and gains the Houthis get and the less concessions they make. This beneficial outcome extends to their Iranian backers since the differences encourage the Iranians to be more inclined to a slow implementation of their obligations in their rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, and less ready to pressure the Houthis or encourage them to make concessions. This deprives negotiations of the advantages that this convergence was supposed to offer.

The Hadramout Test

The wider the differences between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, the more incentive they provide to the Houthis to opt for a military escalation. Although military confrontations by proxy between the two states are unlikely, they are not completely excluded if their differences escalated further. Severe tension in Hadramout is an indication of the possibility of slipping into military action. Peace negotiations are unlikely to continue if such clashes occurred, unless the Saudis and their allies win the battle, but will stop if the UAE and its allies emerge as the winners. Such settling of disputes gives the Houthis a motivation and justification to launch military operations and attack areas outside their control under the pretext of protecting the unity of the country. The popular support they may mobilize bestows legitimacy on their move and boosts their resolve to proceed with such a battle.

The two countries may succeed in containing their differences, but the possible approach to achieving this without undermining the peace process is to consider sharing their influence and interests in a way that does not threaten the unity of the country. All other settlement options further complicate the peace process and carry challenges that vary in type and degree following the nature of the settlement and the damages it causes to the influential actors. The worst scenario to be caused by the repercussions of those differences will involve stopping the peace process. If the two countries decide to settle their differences by partitioning Yemen, such a settlement will lead to the termination of the peace process. It is unlikely that the Yemeni parties— which reject any divisions of the country, including the Houthis and the Islah Party— will proceed in any negotiations or accept a peace agreement that is based on partitioning the country and does not guarantee its unity and territorial integrity.



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