

# **The Silent Struggle for Influence ...**

## **The Future of Saudi-UAE coalition in Yemen**

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## Introduction

At the end of June 2019, the UAE announced its withdrawal, the second force after Saudi Arabia, which has led the Arab coalition since it announced in March 2015 to support Yemeni legitimacy against the Iranian-backed Houthi coup. Abu Dhabi said it would begin the strategy of "peace first" in the war-ravaged country.

In August 2019, the Yemeni government accused the UAE of planning, executing and financing a "coup" or "armed rebellion" against the legitimate government in Aden, after the Abu Dhabi-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) took control of the provisional capital of the internationally recognized legitimate government and other southern cities.

During the years of the war, the UAE established its own militias in southern provinces which had been already liberated from the Houthi coup. The UAE militias consist of 90,000 fighters in several formations, most notably the security belt in Aden, al-Dhale, Lahj, Abyan and Socotra, and the elite force in Shabwa and Hadramout. It also has control over some brigades of the Giant Forces that fight in the west coast of the country along with the "Republican Guard," led by "Tariq Saleh," the nephew of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh; and "Abu al-Abbas Brigades" in the central province of Taiz. This force on the ground has become the UAE military tools in Yemen.

In the recent events, the UAE-backed political tool emerged under the name of the Southern Transitional Council, which was formed in 2017 from former officials of the legitimate government, who were dismissed by President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, including President of the STC, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, who was governor of Aden, "Hani bin Buraik", former Minister of State, and "Ahmed bin Buraik", former governor of Hadramaut.

The Southern Transitional Council (STC) tried to carry out an armed rebellion in January 2018, but a Saudi intervention halted clashes between the security belt and the government forces in Aden after the UAE's allies took control of the port city of Aden, Yemen's interim capital.

But a new rebellion in August 2019 by the UAE-backed forces against President Hadi's forces opened Yemen to new scenarios, especially amid the silence of Saudi Arabia, the leader of the Arab coalition and President Hadi's ally, towards the use of Emirates airlines in favor of the UAE allies. Was that silence a Saudi policy to contain the situation or the silence before the wind that may storm the alliance between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in Yemen?

## UAE Armed Peace:

The start was in June 2019 when the UAE announced the withdrawal of its troops from Yemen. It is not known how many UAE troops are in the country, but sources indicate that the UAE has withdrawn about 75% of its 10,000 soldiers; in addition to huge military vehicles. There was no comment on its troops, but the announcement marked the beginning of a new phase in the country's history and within the Saudi-led coalition. Abu Dhabi justified the withdrawal as a transition from "military strategy" to "peace strategy," but there are other reasons:

- A) UAE-Saudi differences are emerging over the influence and supporting the legitimacy.
- B) There are internal problems and the dissatisfaction of the six emirates with Abu Dhabi's management of the war and sinking the UAE into the Yemen quagmire.
- C) It is trying to save what can be saved after deformation against it and damage its reputation. It presents itself as a country that wants peace, especially after the international punishment against Abu Dhabi by banning the sale of arms from some European countries and attempts to pass a similar resolution in the US Congress.
- D) Regional developments in the Gulf territory waters and Abu Dhabi's fear of the UAE becoming a battleground between the United States and its allies, on one hand, and Iran and its militias on the other.
- E) Abu Dhabi's belief in the futility of continuing war with the Houthis and that the operations against the group may lead to a loss or a long-term stalemate, so it wants to save itself from the "defeat" and make Saudi wear the cause of defeat, so that no one can say that Abu Dhabi was defeated in the first foreign war it fought.

F) Escaping its responsibility for the consequences of war in Yemen and evading its moral responsibility in regard to targeting civilians under the name of wrong strikes and the consequences of chaos in liberated areas such as assassinations, arrests, abductions, torture to death in its own secret prisons, as well as escaping payment of any compensation related to war in Yemen.

G) The announcement of the withdrawal was a gateway to understanding with Iran. After the announcement, a UAE military delegation arrived in Iran to discuss tension in the Gulf waters, a meeting that has not taken place since many years. The Iranians talked that Abu Dhabi had introduced a new policy in the region and that understandings on Yemen had taken place.

H) The announcement of its withdrawal was an attempt not to take responsibility for the rebellion and coup of separatist militias in the southern provinces where it had finally to intervene with air force to save them. The UAE was preparing to enable its allies on the ground to control the liberated southern provinces to open the door for serious repercussions on several levels related to the "legitimacy".

## The battles of Abu Dhabi

After the attempted rebellion, according to the government description, in January 2018, the UAE and its tools recruited the locals and conducted training and preparations for a new battle.<sup>[1]</sup> Nearly a month after Abu Dhabi announced its withdrawal from the country, its tools moved in preparation for the new phase and began to seek cover for this move.

A ballistic missile and Houthi drones penetrated the heavily fortified Green Zone in Aden, where UAE forces are based in Buraiqa, killing Muneer al-Yafei, a senior commander in the UAE-backed security belt. The Southern Transitional Council accused the legitimate government of being behind the operation despite the Houthis' claim of responsibility.

The Houthis wanted to examine the reaction of Abu Dhabi's allies and the legitimate government after the UAE announced its troop withdrawal. The response came swiftly as the event evolved into a street war as Abu Dhabi and the Southern Transitional Council seem to want to use the event as an opportunity to prove their presence in the new regional spheres of influence in the eastern region of the south.

**A series of events took place and caused a major shift in the camp of the "legitimacy/ the coalition" and in the Yemen crisis in general as follows:**

### • **The fall of Aden and Zinjibar:**

On August 10, 2019, the Southern Transitional Council took control of the city of Aden, and troops moved towards the city of Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan province (adjacent to Aden). The city fell into the hands of the UAE-backed security belt.

**The fall of Aden by the Southern Transitional Council is due to some reasons:**

A) There is no safe road for reinforcements - the security belt has already controlled the entrances to the city of Aden and the city center since January 2018.

B) Lack of ammunition and effective quality weapons in the face of firepower and heavy weapons of the STC.

C) The UAE intervened with more than 400 armored vehicles to attack the government forces,<sup>[2]</sup> after it felt the defeat of its allies.

The Yemeni government accused the UAE of "planning", "implementation" and "funding" the "armed insurgency" against it in Aden, and informed the Security Council. Although the UAE has denied the accusations, successive events have revealed its involvement.

### • **Return from Shabwah:**

The UAE-backed Shabwani elite attempted to overthrow the city of Ataq, the capital of Shabwa province, the oil province (adjacent to Abyan and Hadramout). But the Yemeni army, most of it belong to Shabwah, has already repelled the attempted invasion, and the fighting spread to the neighboring districts of Ataq. The government announced with days the full liberation of Ataq from the Shabwani elite on August 26, 2019.

**The Southern Transitional Council failed to control Shabwah for the following reasons:**

- A) The societal nature of Shabwa is a complex tribal nature and most tribes reject the UAE's role, and many tribal members within the Shabwani elite have refused to fight pro-legitimate tribes for fear of “revolutions”. The political role of the governor and the political officials in the province played a lot of tolerance and reconciliation in neutralizing all the factors that prevent the eruption of confrontation.
- B) The existence of supply lines for the government forces from Marib and the third military region in Shabwah, unlike Aden.
- C) The speech and actions of the Southern Transitional Council appeared to be hostile, racial and regional against the people of the northern governorates.
- D) Shabwah is an oil province with a major port for exporting liquefied gas, so controlling it provides considerable revenue to the Southern Transitional Council. This is why the STC continues to fight against the legitimate government. President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his vice Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar do not want the STC control on Shabwah. Saudi Arabia also does not want that because it considers Shabwah as the gate of the eastern region (Hadramaut and Mahra), which it considers as an extension of its influence in Yemen.

Following the announcement of the government control on Shabwah, the army and security units in Abyan moved to topple the security belt camps, and the government forces in Shabwa moved towards Abyan. On Wednesday, August 28, 2019, the army extended its influence over the city of Zinjibar. The forces extended along the coastline to the city of Aden and imposed a siege on it from two sides, "Lahj governorate" and Abyan. Internal resistance, in support of the legitimate government, moved, but was quickly put down by the “security belt” with a campaign of raids, kidnappings and killing.

## • The UAE Shelling of the Yemeni National Army:

On August 29, 2019, the Yemeni National Army and its battalions were at the entrances to the city of Aden in preparation for the coming battle to restore Aden from the Southern Transitional Council militias. The UAE air jets struck the National Army without any precautionary warning killing 300 soldiers. The UAE also struck the army in Aden and Abyan forcing it to withdraw to nearby safe areas to avoid Emirati bombardment that was unexpected. The UAE raids against the army enabled the pro-Emirati paramilitary groups to re-seize Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan, and to tighten control on Aden.

The targeting of the Yemeni army represents a new phase of the war in Yemen. Abu Dhabi said it bombed "terrorist gatherings to protect the coalition forces!" The army accused the UAE of targeting its units and demanded that the government expels the UAE from the coalition. Days later, the Yemeni presidency called Saudi to stop the "UAE Intervention."<sup>[3]</sup>

Saudi official responses were closer to compromise solutions without abandoning the legitimacy that is a cover for the Arab coalition or the UAE that Saudi shares many files regionally and internationally. But press articles by figures close to the royal court have revealed a division between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on how to deal with the new situation. The most voices point to the existence of serious Emirati / Saudi differences over the UAE role in the southern provinces, which threatens the legitimate government and the legitimacy of the Arab coalition intervention in Yemen alike.

## Terrorist ally!

The UAE's position on describing the government forces as "terrorists" was nothing but an attempt to evade international consequences after it bombed the army of an internationally recognized state. Abu Dhabi intervened to support the government and restore its legitimacy. But Abu Dhabi has found that the air attack on the Yemeni army the only option to protect its allies in southern Yemen after seeing them falling in battles with the government forces which approached Aden and were ready to fight the final battle to restore the city.

Abu Dhabi justified that the bombing of the army was in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, but this is not true. There is nothing in the international law to justify the UAE bombing of the forces of a member state of the United Nations, but it can be considered as an aggression. The fact is that labeling the Yemeni army as a "terrorist group" means that the legitimate government is terrorist, which means that Saudi Arabia and UAE support terrorism!

**In terms of the international law, the following can be noted:**

- Yemen is under Chapter VII. Although it detracts the "principle of non-interference", the violation of the sovereignty of Yemen is specified in Chapter VII resolution that says that the situation in Yemen has become "threatening the international peace and security," which includes the imposition of sanctions against individuals and entities that represent threats, as it imposed economic and political sanctions, etc. The intervention of the Arab coalition in Yemen was not based on Chapter VII, but through an official invitation by Yemen to Saudi Arabia to confront the Houthis, a right guaranteed to States. The president's letter to the Security Council in March 24 states: "The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League have been requested to provide immediate support, by all means and measures, including military intervention, to protect Yemen and its people from the continued aggression of the Houthis." The UAE presence in Yemen was based on this message. The UAE, along with other Gulf States - other than Oman - agreed to similar letters in response to Yemen's request.<sup>[4]</sup>
- All Security Council resolutions, including Resolution 2216, affirm the strong commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Yemen. What Abu Dhabi has done to support the "separatists" and undermine the legitimacy of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi is a violation of this resolution, which is supposed to push the Council to impose sanctions on Abu Dhabi or UAE officials.

- The UAE's justifications and pressure to form another government in Yemen violate the sovereignty of a member state of the United Nations as well as the UN Charter, and the UAE presence in Yemen is to be considered an "occupation".
- The Yemeni military confrontation against an "armed rebellion"- according to the international law- is a right in all international laws and covenants and in the Arab League Charter.
- The Geneva Conventions refer to “non-interference” and not to be used in violation of the sovereignty of a country. The Third Article states (1) the protocol cannot be used to violate the sovereignty of a country or the right of a government to defend the national unity and territorial integrity of the State, (2) No provision of this Protocol shall be invoked as a justification for any reason whatsoever to intervene directly or indirectly in an armed conflict or in the internal or external affairs of the country in which a conflict is going on.<sup>[5]</sup>

## The illusion of dialogue

After the Southern Transitional Council took control of Aden, Saudi Arabia called for dialogue in the Saudi city of Jeddah under the auspices of the Kingdom. In August 2019, an attempt was made to hold consultations between the government and the transitional council, but the delegation of the council left Jeddah after the government refused to consult without implementing the coalition's decision to withdraw from government camps and headquarters in Aden. The council delegation returned again in September 2019 but this dialogue faces many obstacles:

- The Transitional Council refuses to withdraw from the camps and government buildings in Aden, which is the condition of the legitimate government to start the dialogue.

- Consultations with the Southern Transitional Council without their withdrawal and the integration of belts and elites in the army forces legitimizes armed rebellion against the state for political gain, and this legitimizes the Houthi coup, which imposed a military reality in September 2014 to take over the power.
- Direct consultations were held between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to reach an agreement to end the conflict between the two parties to be submitted later to the "Southern Transitional" and President "Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi."<sup>[6]</sup> The condition of the Southern Transitional demands the appointment of a vice president from within the council as well as two key ministries in the government, which is rejected by the legitimate government. The condition of Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi is that the southern transitional complies with his decisions and the integration of the UAE-funded and run militias into the Yemeni army and security.<sup>[7]</sup>
- The UAE bombing of the Yemeni army, which it described as "terrorist", has caused the absence of a common ground for dialogue. For the legitimate government, the dialogue should be with the UAE, not with its tools,<sup>[8]</sup> and to be the basis of kicking the UAE out of the country, not to enhance its presence. This makes it impossible to hold talks. Abu Dhabi is trying to establish its presence in the southern Yemen for the next stage after the war ends, and that will be possible only through its militias on the ground against the legitimate government.

## The aftermath of the Aden rebellion

If the bombing of warplanes by the Yemeni army significantly affects the relationship between the government and Saudi Arabia, on one hand, and the UAE, on the other hand, that means the disintegration of the Arab coalition and approaching the end. Thus, the control of the Abu Dhabi-backed Southern Transitional Council is a very bad turning point for the position of the internationally recognized legitimate government. This points to a deterioration in the government presence and a weak negotiating position in favor of the UAE-backed militias.

The repercussions of the events of Aden in the south of the country will be reflected in the government's negotiations with the Houthis and the position of the countries of the region towards the UAE. It will also be reflected to the Horn of Africa, where the separatist factions, most of which are supported by Abu Dhabi, are active.

**The repercussions of the armed rebellion in the south would be as follows:**

### **- Provoking Regional Retaliations:**

When referring to the southern Yemeni governorates, two major forces should be mentioned as two conflicting poles in the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, a regional conflict between tribal / regional alliances. The provinces of al-Dhale and Lahj stand at one of the poles and Abyan and Shabwah stand at the other pole. The rivalry between the two poles developed to fighting in January 1986, which led to the exhaustion of the "southern state" that again faced the danger of partition, so its leaders rushed to a unity with the north.

Although the Yemeni army is comprised from all governorates, the president's affiliation to Abyan and the affiliation of most of the leaders of the Southern Transitional Council to Lahj and al-Dhale makes the current conflict a "revenge" action. It was clear in the STC latest hostile statements against the northerners.<sup>[9]</sup> The STC also practiced detentions and field executions according to identity.

The rush of war in southern Yemen to be a state of retaliation with unpredictable consequences, foreshadows different internal conflicts, mostly funded by from UAE, will not stop easily.

### **- Dismantling the Arab Coalition**

The UAE attack on the Yemeni national army and its support for the "armed rebellion" in Aden make the Arab coalition for supporting the legitimacy in Yemen in a state of weakness and swing. Accusing the military of terrorism, as much as it offends Yemen, it destroys the legitimacy of war against the Houthis, as the legitimate government, according to UAE, is "supportive of terrorism," the same justifications spoken by the Iran-backed Houthis group.

The UAE allegation makes the recognized government, which gave Saudi Arabia the legitimacy to lead an Arab coalition in Yemen to fight the Houthis, weak and unable to run a state. It also means that "terrorist" organizations are part of the legitimate army and its military tactics, according to the second force in the Arab coalition, the UAE. In addition, the Saudi sympathy with Abu Dhabi and its project in Yemen will be considered by the Yemeni people as a force of invasion and occupation and this may have big international and regional consequences that will threaten the Kingdom in the future.

### **-Dropping down references of political transition in Yemen:**

The armed rebellion by the Transitional Council, with Emirati support, in the south reduces the three references to political transition in Yemen (the Gulf Initiative, its executive mechanism, the outcomes of the national dialogue conference and the UN Security Council resolutions on top of which is 2216). The UAE stubbornness may lead to the collapse of the UNSC resolution 2216 that recognizes President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi as the legitimate president of the country.

### **- The Legitimization of separation and coup:**

The military action of the UAE-backed militias against the legitimacy is an attempt to impose a political reality of secession, which means that the Houthi coup in the north has been legitimized by the violence and weapons used by the UAE, the second partner in the Saudi-led Arab coalition.

The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council raises banners of secession in southern Yemen and returns to pre-1990 conditions, and tries to impose secession by force, although it does not represent these signs alone. Other several parties in the south call for secession and others see that a federal state is a better solution. The fact is that the Southern Transitional Council and its UAE ally cannot separate the south of the country by force.

The international system is based on the principle of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States. According to this principle, international law prohibits unilateral separation, because allowing such a separation would dismantle most of the world and create endless chaos. On the basis of this principle, the UN Security Council refused to recognize the southern state proclaimed during the 1994 war. In its resolution 924 and 931, the council dealt with the conflict as an internal conflict within the Republic of Yemen.<sup>[10]</sup>

### **- The expulsion of UAE and damaging its foreign policy:**

The UAE is unlikely to remain in the coalition to support the legitimate government in its role. But its nominal presence within the coalition supports Saudi Arabia's survival in the Yemen war. Saudi Arabia is likely to push itself slowly to pull the rug from under the UAE to formally supervise Riyadh over Aden and other southern provinces.<sup>[11]</sup> It seems that the coalition is responsible for the expulsion of a state within the coalition, as what happened with the removal of Qatar from the Arab coalition in 2017. But the government can declare the UAE expulsion, which will force Saudi Arabia to adopt it as Yemen is the only party that legitimizes the coalition intervention.

On the other hand, Abu Dhabi's foreign policy is affected by what it does in southern Yemen. Countries will be more cautious and careful about the UAE presence on their lands and the alliances that UAE weaves. Yemen is not the only experience of Abu Dhabi, it has experiences in other countries in the region, which means that the UAE loss in the future will be huge.

### **- The Growing Iranian influence:**

Since the Southern Transitional Council has taken control over Aden, the Iranian support for the Houthis has increased. What raises many inquiries is that Iran has increased its support for the Houthis following a visit by a UAE military delegation to Tehran before the latest events in Yemen. Iranians said that they discussed many files in the region including Yemen and that they reached an “agreement”.

After that, the Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with the Houthis spokesman Mohamed Abdulsalam in a rare meeting as the Supreme Leader never met with members of a pro-Tehran group. Iran reportedly agreed to appoint an ambassador to Yemen through the Houthi armed group.

In addition, Iran has allies within the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council, and works with regional and international partners on forming a new southern component - under establishment - called the Southern National Salvation Council, which brings together several members from outside the STC, including the Peaceful Southern Movement that demands secession and al-Mahrah movement against Saudi Arabia.<sup>[12]</sup>

### **- More international interventions:**

In the aftermath of the Aden events, international efforts, specifically US efforts to build a peace agreement in Yemen and the formation of lines of talks between the Saudis and the Houthis, are active. It appears that the US State Department has already begun consultations with the Houthis in preparation for consultations between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia in Muscat to be chaired by US Ambassador Christopher Hansel. In this regard, Prince Khaled bin Salman (Saudi Deputy Defense Minister who is in charge of the Yemeni file) visited Washington and met with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. "I held a productive meeting with Khalid bin Salman today to discuss Yemen and maritime security," Pompeo said on Twitter. "It is very important for Yemen's unity, stability and prosperity that the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council resolve their dispute," he said.

US Defense Secretary Mark Asper said US support for Saudi Arabia in Yemen was limited to defense. He said he was discussing the willingness of the parties to the conflict in Yemen to reach a political agreement.

If the situation continues to deteriorate, and the Yemeni legitimacy continues to collapse, Saudi Arabia, through America, will try to engage in consultations to neutralize the Houthis' missile power and drones, but the price will be reflected in its stance towards the legitimate government, especially after Saudi weak position towards the UAE support for "armed rebellion" in southern Yemen. The latter statement has not strengthened by standing as long as it happens. The UAE tolerates an armed insurgency in southern Yemen.

In the same direction, the UAE called for an international intervention to counter terrorism in Yemen after it bombed the Yemeni army units at the entrances to the city of Aden on August 29, 2019, but the response came from Washington through congratulation from the US State Department to Yemen on including Yemen in the international coalition against ISIS, to become the 81st member of the coalition.<sup>[13]</sup>

There is also a new Russian move, contrary to the precarious position, especially since Moscow will take the presidency of the Security Council. The Russian new position began with a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry, which expressed concern over the UAE raids on the Yemeni army, saying the division of the country "is in the interest of terrorist groups."

In addition to meetings between Russian officials and Houthi leaders, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov met with leaders of the Transitional Council and leaders of the Southern National Salvation Council (under establishment) during his visit to Muscat at the end of last August.

## **Intersection of UAE-Saudi influence:**

In 2016, it was reported that the UAE and Saudi Arabia had already shared operations in Yemen. Abu Dhabi oversees the coalition operations in southern Yemen and the Red Sea coast - after a heavy loss to Saudi Arabia when one of its most prominent military leaders Colonel Abdullah al-Sabhan was killed in a shelling by the Houthis near Bab al-Mandab. And Riyadh oversees military operations against the Houthis in north, central and eastern Yemen. This has opened the door for Abu Dhabi to build its own goals and ambitions in Yemen since the beginning of its supervision over the liberated provinces of southern Yemen.

The separatists began to move as an authority in the south as the UAE increased pressure on the legitimacy to appoint them in important positions in 2016. Insecurity and terrorist organizations activity justified the Emiratis to build paramilitary formations, parallel to the legitimate authority, including Muneer al-Yafei (Abu al-Yamamah), who was killed in a Houthi attack in August 2019.

Al-Yafei played a key role in the formation of the UAE-trained and equipped paramilitary formations, known as the "security belt and elites." Aidarous al-Zubeidi, who was governor of Aden, and a number of governors who were all appointed by Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi under a UAE pressure, usually admitted their intension to separate the southern Yemen.

The UAE is primarily interested in controlling southern Yemen, particularly the ports of the south and west, especially the strategic port of Aden, to secure its control over the commercial shipping lines in the region; Gulf of Aden and Horn of Africa.

Abu Dhabi is also seeking to be near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait to protect its shipping and trade interests and to give itself the position of a rising power in the region.<sup>[14]</sup> It hopes to be America's strongest partner in the fight against terrorism, as it sees the Belhaf oil port in Shabwa, which exports liquefied gas, as a gateway to compete with Iran and Qatar in the liquefied natural gas market.

Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia are looking for ports on the open seas in the south, away from Iran's threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. Riyadh is interested in al-Mahrah as it wants to build an oil port there, but it looks at the eastern provinces in general, Al-Jouf, Marib, Shabwah and Hadramout, as the areas of influence and national security.

The influence of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh in Yemen is crisscrossed at some red points, including Belhaf in Shabwa, Mukalla in Hadramaut and Socotra Island. In addition, when Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni legitimacy agreed to a truce in Hodeidah, they have hindered forces loyal to the United Arab Emirates to continue the battles to take control of the main Yemeni port, Hodeidah. This maybe one the main factors that pushed Abu Dhabi to blow the situation in southern Yemen in a reprisal response, not to take control on the south only, but maybe in preparation for moving the UAE-backed forces in the west coast to storm areas in the most populous province of Taiz.

Saudi Arabia has not provided an opinion on the control of secessionists in southern Yemen since 2016. Even after secessionists had formed the Southern Transitional Council, the Kingdom had not any comment. It only considered the southern issue as a national issue that should be solved. Although some Yemeni officials talk about Saudi opposition to the UAE role, other Yemeni officials believe that Saudi Arabia receives reports on the situation in southern Yemen from the UAE intelligence, not from the local authorities. They say that those reports contain "counterfeiting information and fallacies".<sup>[15]</sup> However, there are many indications that confirm that Saudi has fears of UAE support for forces that seek secession. But Saudi has not any confirmed strategy that can compete with the Emirati one in southern Yemen.

However, the recent events in Aden and the Transitional Council control and its rejection to withdraw from Aden, as in 2018, put Saudi Arabia in an embarrassing position for two considerations. First: The STC control on Aden means the collapse of Abd Rabbo Mansour's legitimacy and this matter affects the legitimacy of Saudi intervention in Yemen, and also makes the Houthis stronger than before. Second: it is difficult to give up Hadi's legitimacy and support the Transitional Council. It is also difficult to abandon the UAE as a key partner in the coalition as Saudi Arabia will lose the international cover to confront the Houthis in Yemen. In both cases, Saudi Arabia is forced to reach consensus solutions, but that does not mean that its good relationship with the UAE on Yemen will continue in this way. The alliance between the two countries regarding Yemen is already disintegrating.

### **The most prominent indicators of differences between the two countries on Yemen:**

- Saudi Arabia felt it had been "twisted arm" in southern Yemen. This what King Salman bin Abdulaziz said to Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (August 12) during a meeting after the coup in Aden by saying that he would not recognize any new equation that twists the arm of the Kingdom and reduces its role in southern Yemen.<sup>[16]</sup>

King Salman also expressed his anger at Abu Dhabi during his meeting with Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi on the following day and promised to stand by the legitimate government<sup>[17]</sup>

- It seems that King Salman bin Abdul Aziz began to think about working away from the UAE, which the Kingdom has relied on since 2016 in monitoring the situation and alliances in the Yemeni provinces. Some information indicates that the Kingdom has revived a Saudi military office in charge of relations with the Yemeni tribes and appointed commander of the Saudi joint forces, General Prince Fahd bin Turki bin Abdul Aziz as the head of the office. King Salman disbanded all Saudi-Emirati joint intelligence and military services that had been in contact with Yemeni tribes since 2015.<sup>[18]</sup>
- Saudi Arabia's move to ease its actions against Qatar, with the news that there is a tendency to solve its problem with Qatar, mediated by Kuwait and the United States, may be the reason of the anger of the Emiratis who used the Yemen file as a means to twist the arm of Saudi Arabia.
- Saudi Arabia pushed its troops to Shabwah province, and this was officially announced, in a trend indicating Saudi fears of Abu Dhabi's attempts to control the oil province. This could lead to a new Emirati challenge. The UAE's decision to withdraw its troops from Yemen seemed to be, for Saudi Arabia, a move taken by the UAE to serve its own interests. Riyadh feels that Abu Dhabi abandoned it in Yemen while Abu Dhabi tries to present itself as a more mature partner that can stabilize the region, even if the real point is to minimize its losses and move forward without Riyadh.
- The two Gulf countries also seem to have different views on the arch-foe, Iran. The two countries have sought to support the United States to take a stronger position on Tehran's activities in the region and its missile capabilities, but the UAE has adopted a lighter tone after the bombings in oil tankers in the Gulf waters - Washington and Riyadh blamed Iran.

The UAE officials visit to Tehran and the influence of Washington's "extreme pressure policy" against Iran with Saudi backing seem to have inspired Saudi leaders that Abu Dhabi is drifting away from Saudi to be close to Iran. The UAE's fears of being a business hub for Iranian moves are high, but Saudi Arabia is one of the world's top oil exporters and it sees itself as a stabilizing factor in the region<sup>[19]</sup> and not much affected by Iranian threats.

To counter talk of differences between the two countries, a joint statement was issued calling on analysts from both countries not to belittle the alliance between them. The two countries actions in Yemen, however, revealed a deep crisis between the two countries has begun.

But after what happened in Yemen, Saudi Arabia appears to be already weighing the future of the coalition with the UAE on a larger scale and Abu Dhabi could face a blow if its moves continue to threaten Saudi security.

Until the emergence of a Saudi official position or a movement on the ground that can measure the degree of Riyadh's differences with Abu Dhabi, we can read the situation now in the context of careful coordination between the two countries in everything that happens in Yemen, including the recent events in Aden. But if we rely on the policy of the UAE in Yemen, which enables the Houthis to remain as a permanent problem on the Saudi border in the north and enhances the UAE presence in southern Yemen benefiting from the Saudi silence towards it as a cover, even temporarily, the alliance between the two countries will collapse at any time.

As Saudi Arabia seeks to end the war in Yemen at any moment, hoping to subdue the Houthis by force or through dialogue, the UAE realizes that it will come out of Yemen without any benefit unless it moves on the ground early and forms armed entities and militias to maintain its influence for a long time, at least in the south.

## Players' Options:

### First: The UAE

The UAE has one option based on its main turning point by accusing the Yemeni army of “terrorism” - risking everything and embarking on a bone-breaking adventure with everyone in Yemen, the region and the world, and losing its good relationship with Saudi Arabia.

The main option seems to be a zero-sum option, either to lose everything after the government controls the situation or to win everything by maintaining its presence and influence in Yemen after the withdrawal of its forces from the country, but this will turn the southern governorates into a hotbed of ongoing conflict as most of Yemenis reject the UAE presence on their land.

### Second: The Southern Transitional Council

The Southern Transitional Council does not represent southern Yemen or the southern issue, and the events of August gave confirmation that Shabwah, Hadhramout, al-Mahra, Abyan and Socotra will remain out of its power and cannot represent them. Therefore, the Transitional Council has two options. The first option is to go ahead with the UAE plans to provoke an intense regional war in the southern provinces.

The second option is to participate as one of the southern components and accept the integration of the UAE-trained militias into the Yemeni army, but this option is ruled out. In this case, the STC would prefer war as long as it remains under Abu Dhabi's control.

### Third: Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia decided its position on the events of August in Aden with a statement published on Thursday, 5 September 2019, confirming its support for the legitimate government, and rejected any "new reality" in Yemen by armed force.

But its options are more complicated. It is hard to risk with losing the coalition in Yemen by expelling Abu Dhabi, although its actions directly harm the Saudi national security. But it may have the option of holding a "Saudi-Yemeni coalition" only to continue confronting the Houthis and militias affiliated with the UAE in southern Yemen, but that could go a long way towards bigger and wider tension in relations between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which may be reflected in multiple files in the region of common interest. In addition to being a major threat to Saudi national security, what happened in southern Yemen was directly reflected in Tehran as Iran recognized the Houthis as a de facto authority for the first time by accepting a new ambassador appointed by the Houthis, which has been unacceptable throughout the war years.<sup>[20]</sup>

The other option for Riyadh is to move forward with the UAE's vision in Yemen, but it will be very costly for Saudi Arabia in the medium and short terms.

## Fourth: The Government of Yemen

The relationship between Yemen and the UAE has gone towards separation, at least during the current war. What Abu Dhabi has done is bad for the coalition and the legitimate government. The aim of the UAE presence in Yemen was to topple the coup in Sana'a, but it supported a new coup in Aden!

One of the government's main options is to pursue an alliance with Saudi Arabia to counter coups, one in Sana'a and one in Aden. Although it is costly, this option is important without the UAE being part of the coalition, and integrating paramilitary forces into the military and security as well as reshuffling the government. But that requires the full approval and support from Saudi Arabia with weapons, ammunition and funding.

### **Without Saudi approval, there are several options:**

**- The declaration of the end of the UAE's role in Yemen:** President Hadi declares that the UAE presence in Yemen is no longer desirable, and that what the UAE practices in Yemen is an "occupation" that violates the international laws. It could be through a letter to the Security Council that put Yemen under Chapter VII and resolution 2216 that considers Hadi as the legitimate president of the country.

This option will embarrass Saudi Arabia, but it will force it to stand by Hadi's decision. However, the UAE and Saudi Arabia's subsequent reaction may be unpredictable. They may declare the end of the coalition and hold serious negotiations with the Houthis over targeting Saudi Arabia.

The UAE presence in Yemen was not based on a UN resolution or Chapter VII, but at a Saudi request after Riyadh was invited by the "legitimate president of the country."

**- Relying on the National Army:** The legitimate government will need the National Army and the Popular Resistance to fight with all its weight against the UAE project in the southern provinces, and it will stop depending on the decisions of the coalition and its approval, but this will go through two dilemmas: armament and training. The government does not have an ammunition factory in areas under its control. It is also difficult for the government to get smart thermal missiles to secure its forces from UAE air attacks.

**- New Alliances:** The legitimate government can get out of the state of dependence on the Arab coalition by looking for new alliances in the region to obtain appropriate funding and arming through which the legitimate government and those countries meet in the objectives and premises.

The first option needs boldness from Saudi Arabia, and it is better for Riyadh to adopt it and stand with the government against the UAE because of the bad repercussions of its support for militias and the armed insurgency and carrying out raids against the national army, which will harm the future of regional security. The other two options require time and effort and the success is difficult without Saudi support for the Yemeni government. Riyadh can balance the three options, dialogue with the UAE to end its role in Yemen, relying on the army and resistance on the ground, and the search for a new regional or international ally to cover the vacuum left by Abu Dhabi.

## Margins:

- [1] More information on mobilization and conflicting parties in Aden and the fall of Aden to the hand of Abu Dhabi's allies can be found in a previous report by the Abaad Center: The Open War in Southern Yemen  
Arabic: <https://abaadstudies.org/news-59816.html>  
English: <https://abaadstudies.org/news-59817.html>
- [2] Interview with Yemeni Minister of Transport Saleh Al – Jebwani on Yemen TV  
<http://www.yemenmonitor.com/Manage/Archive/ArtMID/905/ArticleID/34318>  
Statement by the Minister of Interior Ahmed al-Maisari via social networks: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1162043533980698>
- [3] Yemen accuses UAE of bombing its forces ... Abu Dhabi justifies raids by pursuing "terrorists" <https://aawsat.com/home/article/1878876>
- [4] Security Council Resolution 2216 concerning Yemen
- [5] Read the additional protocol to the Geneva Conventions, 1977, about the non-international conflicts, at <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/5ntce2.htm>
- [6] Officials: Saudi Arabia pushes for settlement in south Yemen  
<https://www.apnews.com/059046700b694fbe95b710c60aedd3e5>
- [7] Officials: Saudi Arabia pushes for settlement in south Yemen  
<https://www.apnews.com/059046700b694fbe95b710c60aedd3e5>  
Talks to end power struggle in southern Yemen stalled  
[https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/reuters/ Officials - Talks to end conflict- over power -in southern Yemen- stalled 45211136](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/reuters/Officials_-_Talks_to_end_conflict_-_over_power_-_in_southern_Yemen_-_stalled_45211136)
- [8] Audio recording of "Ahmed Al Maysari", Minister of Interior in the legitimate government
- [9] Audio recording of "Abu Meshaal Al-Kazmi," the security director of Abyan, loyal to the government, after the bombing of his forces by the Emirati aviation and his talk about tribal revenge
- [10] The Difficulties of Legal or Actual Separation in South Yemen- Abdalnaser al-Moade  
<https://aawsat.com/home/article/1871186>
- [11] Interview with Yemeni Minister of Transport
- [12] The Southern National Salvation Council - under formation - consists of (Committee of sit-ins of the sons of the province of Mahra, the Union of Southern Women, the National Council of the province of Shabwa, the Council of the Southern Free Resistance, the Abyan Tribal Social Alliance, the Union of Southern Youth, the Independent Youth Assembly of Aden, and the Youth and Student Movement).

[13] Tweet by the US Department of State on its page, 6 September 2019

[14] Study by Abaad on the UAE's influence in Yemen... Foundations and Harvest

English: <https://abaadstudies.org/pdf-22.pdf>

Arabic: <https://abaadstudies.org/pdf-23.pdf>

[15] Interview with Minister of Transport Saleh al-Jabwani on Yemen TV (previous source)

[16] Saudi King Salman, Sheikh Mohammad and the situation in Aden <https://www.tacticalreport.com/saudi-king-salman-sheikh-mohammad-and-the-situation-in-aden/>

[17] UAE loosens Saudi alliance to push peacemaker image

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-emirates-diplomacy/uae-loosens-saudi-alliance-to-push-peacemaker-image-idUSKCN1VI1WA>

[18] Saudi Prince Fahd in charge of relations with Yemen tribes

<https://www.tacticalreport.com/saudi-prince-fahd-in-charge-of-relations-with-yemen-tribes/>

[19] UAE loosens Saudi alliance to push peacemaker image

[20] Following the UAE bombing of the Yemeni army in Aden, Tehran agrees to the appointment of a Houthi ambassador to Tehran named Ibrahim al-Dailami, the first time since their coup on September 21, 2014.



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