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UAE-Backed Militias Maximize Yemen's Fragmentation

by Eleonora Ardemagni

On 7 July 2017, rival gatherings took place in Yemen's southern port city of Aden to mark the end of the brief 1994 civil war. United by secessionist aspirations, southerners are increasingly divided over political leadership, foreign patrons and the future trajectory of the country. The Southern Movement, a pro-autonomy group established in 2007 that formally supports Yemen's internationally recognized and Saudi-backed government, met in Al-Oroodh Square. A second demonstration, organized by the recently founded, pro-secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC), which today represents the third *de facto* government in Yemen and enjoys close relations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), was held in the Mualla district.

The rival gatherings shed light on the enhanced fragmentation of Yemeni society as well as the growing divisions between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, two

formal allies in the Saudi-led military coalition battling the Houthi rebellion in Yemen since 2015. Since the start of the intervention, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates agreed to share operative responsibilities: the Saudis would focus on the northern border with Saudi Arabia and the air campaign, while the Emirates concentrated on the south and organized ground operations. As the conflict evolved, the two allies found themselves pursuing different strategies: Saudi Arabia, through its support for the recognized government led by President Abdu Rabu Mansur Hadi and presently relocated from the capital Sana'a to Aden, prioritizes a federal but united Yemen, while the UAE is bolstering the southerners' secessionist aspirations.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are therefore aligning with different, sometimes competing, local actors. The UAE has mainly collaborated with southern secessionist groups (such as the STC)

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and pro-autonomy Salafists, in contrast with the pro-unity, Saudi (and Qatari) backed Islah party: the Emirates have worked to exclude the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Islah's backbone, considered a national threat to the UAE. Since its founding in May 2017, the UAE-backed STC has banned all MB-affiliated movements and activities.

In South Yemen, the UAE has promoted security sector reform in areas previously controlled by Houthi forces and those loyal to Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah-Saleh (such as Aden), or by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as in the port city of Mukalla, in the Hadhramaut governorate. Here, the UAE has built a military-driven patronage network: Abu Dhabi is currently training more than 11,000 soldiers from Hadhramaut and 14,000 from Aden and neighbouring provinces.¹ Among these are the Security Belt Forces (or Al-Hizam Brigade) that were established in 2016 by Hadi's decree under the Interior Ministry's authority, mostly to secure Aden. These are largely comprised of Salafists, security forces belonging to the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) and members of the influent Yafi'i tribal confederation. The UAE has also backed regional-based militias such as the Shabwani Elite Forces (from the Shabwa region) and the Hadhrami Elite Forces (from Hadhramaut), which are formally part of Yemen's army.

¹ Aziz El Yaakoubi, "UAE Builds Up Yemen Regional Army But Country Fragments", in *Reuters*, 3 May 2017, <http://reut.rs/2p4ntRl>.

The UAE's Special Forces worked effectively with armed non-state actors when battling insurgents and jihadists, regaining lost territories in the South, where UAE-supported groups are also engaged in counterterrorism alongside Emirati forces against AQAP. But in areas recaptured by these militias, UAE-financed and trained groups do not operate within the legal umbrella: "while affiliated with the legitimate government", these militias "operate largely outside its control",² answering directly to the Emirates.

Therefore, the UAE's selective transnational patronage has weakened local ownership, deterring militias' disarmament: it has also led to violent confrontations with the recognized government. Last April, Security Belt Forces, the STC's *de facto* military wing, clashed with Hadi's loyalists for control over Aden's international airport. On 22 April, Ahmed Ben Burik, the governor of Hadhramaut, hosted a pro-autonomy and UAE-supported conference with the participation of pro-independence tribal chiefs, but without inviting representatives from the Hadi government. In both instances, Hadi replaced the governors: in Aden, Aidarous Al-Zubaidi was removed on 27 April, becoming the leader of the STC, while Ben Burik was replaced on 29 June.

The UAE's policy in South Yemen is activating new layers of conflict. First of all, it reinforces the divide between "haves" and "have-nots" with regards

² United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen (S/2017/81)*, 31 January 2017, p. 18, <http://undocs.org/S/2017/81>.

to financial and military backing for militias: in Taiz, the UAE denied support to the MB's powerful military wing. Secondly, it provides legitimacy to specific informal actors, thereby widening the "grey zone" between regular and irregular security forces, many of which act as if they were legitimate state actors. Reports of informal prisons, arbitrary detentions and torture attributed to UAE-backed militias have multiplied, spreading discontent among locals.³ Thirdly, such divisions are exacerbating tensions within the "anti-Houthi front", split between a tiny "pro-Hadi faction" and the broader camp that opposes the Houthi insurgency but does not recognize Hadi's leadership. Multiple anti-Hadi protests have taken place in Aden over recent months against the lack of salaries, basic services and electricity shortages.

The UAE's current strategy in Yemen is also (re)igniting new and old rivalries among regional and tribal-based militias with competing interests and agendas. The old generation still remembers the legacies of the intra-South civil war in 1986, while the youth challenges post-reunification resource management, also contesting President Hadi's federal reform plan for Yemen.

Twin strategic objectives drive Abu Dhabi's policy in Yemen: the UAE is seeking to contain the MB in the broader region, while simultaneously enhancing its regional military and maritime projection. It is no coincidence

that Abu Dhabi concentrated its combat and reconstruction efforts on Yemen's southern coastal and commercial cities (Aden, Mukalla and Al-Mokha). The Emirates have also placed much emphasis on protecting freedom of navigation through the Bab el-Mandeb strait, constructing military bases in the Horn of Africa (in Eritrea and in Somaliland)⁴ and investing in Yemen's strategic islands for military purposes (such as the military training camp in Socotra and the airstrip in Perim, at the southern entrance to the Red Sea).

As a result, the UAE is likely to remain a long-term player in Yemen. With Riyadh reportedly seeking an exit strategy from Yemen, Saudi Arabia could be convinced to embrace the UAE's pro-secessionist stance in an effort to preserve stability in the South. Yet, such a policy could ignite clashes among competing militias, while the conflict with the Houthis is anything but won. Through external funding and legitimization, the UAE managed to transform non-state actors into hybrid security agents operating alongside Emirati forces: while militias temporarily filled the security vacuum, they now overshadow and replace the regular security sector, weakening the rule of law.

In the event of a new intra-South struggle, the only winner would be Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which again could capitalize on disorder to regain lost territories and attract more recruits. Such a devastating scenario

³ Human Rights Watch, *Yemen: UAE Backs Abusive Local Forces*, 22 June 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/node/305089>.

⁴ Eleonora Ardemagni, "The Horn of Africa's Growing Importance to the U.A.E.", in *Middle East Institute Articles*, 25 April 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/node/24787>.

not only would harm Yemen and its southern inhabitants, but it would also seriously complicate diplomatic efforts to resolve the Yemeni conflict.

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