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# Future of the Yemen conflict after the Withdrawal of Emirati Forces

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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On 8 July 2019, the United Arab Emirates announced its intention to reduce and redeploy its forces in Yemen, as part of its transition from a “military first” to a “peace first” strategy. The decision raised questions about its implications on the ground, and the fate of the Arab alliance, which has already shrunk to just Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the future of the conflict in Yemen between the UN sanctioned government, represented by President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, and the de facto authority in Sana’a, Ansar Allah (the Houthis).

## Strength and Concentration of UAE Forces

Some sources estimate that there are about 5000 Emirati soldiers participating in the war in Yemen.<sup>(1)</sup> They are located at their own military bases and command and training centers in several coastal areas around the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, with the exception of the Sarawah base located in the northern governorate of Marib. These bases are Brega in al-Buraiqa district, Aden governorate, which is the main center for Emirati forces in Yemen,<sup>(2)</sup> Al-Riyan (Al-Riyan Mukalla airport) in Hadramout (Sahel), Balhaf in the Shabwa Governorate, al-Makha (or Mocha) port in Taiz and al-Khokha in the Hodeida Governorate. Limited numbers of UAE troops are deployed in parts of Aden, Lahj, Shabwa, Hadramout, Al Mahrah and areas of the West Coast.<sup>(3)</sup> The island of Socotra in the Indian Ocean, where the UAE has built military barracks, is free of any Houthi military activity.

## The Military and Security Forces Supporting the UAE Presence

The role of the UAE forces is to command and control the armed formations established and supported during the battles with the Houthis in the southern governorates of 2015 and 2016, as they become a cornerstone of the UAE security strategy in Yemen.<sup>(4)</sup> The role of the Sudanese forces emerged in the battles of the West Coast, along with other armed formations established by the UAE for this purpose, and later came to be known as the “Joint Forces”.<sup>(5)</sup> The most important of these formations are:

### Security Belt Forces

Southern security formations spread around the governorates of Aden, Lahj, Abyan and Dhale. A number of them are participating in a second group of attacking forces on the West Coast, such

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1 Declan Walsh & David D. Kirkpatrick, “U.A.E. Pulls Most Forces from Yemen in Blow to Saudi War Effort,” *The New York Times*, 11/7/2019, accessed on 15/7/2019, at: <https://nyti.ms/2JMaaRX>

2 “Mohammed bin Rashid and Mohammed bin Zayed greet the UAE soldiers in Yemen - live Eid al-Adha broadcast”, YouTube, 1/9/2017, accessed 15/7/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2Obg6cH>

3 “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by paragraph 6 of Security Council resolution 2342 (2017)”, UN Security Council, 26/1/2018, accessed 15/7/2019, at <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2018/68/Corr.1>; “On Yemen: Pillars and Harvest,” Abbad Studies and Research Center, 23/9/2018, accessed 15/7/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2NW4UQL>

4 “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by paragraph 6 of Security Council resolution 2342 (2017)”

5 “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by paragraph 6 of Security Council resolution 2402 (2018)”, UN Security Council, 25/1/2019, accessed 15/7/2019, at: <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2019/83>



as the 20th brigade, and the 3rd brigade back-up and support. The back-up and support forces are the combined entity of the security belt forces and other support brigades. However, the so-called security belt forces have been called “backup and support forces” due to the prominent field activity of the belt forces.

## Elite Forces

These are southern military formations, named the “urban elite” spread around Hadramout coast and the “Shabwaan elite” spread around the governorate of Shabwa. Attempts to form elite forces in Mahara and Socotra have failed; they have remained linked to legitimate government forces.

## Combined forces

These forces are composed of independent units, mainly southern and northern militias, which include both the Giants brigades, the resistance brigades, and the republican guards. It is located on the west coast of the Red Sea, in the area stretching from the Bab al-Mandab Strait to Hodeida Airport. It was merged under the supervision of a Saudi committee, under a unified Yemeni leadership, following the departure of the UAE command, which it supervised until the end of the first week of July 2019.<sup>(6)</sup>

There are other forces called the “Abu Abbas Brigades”, in relation to its founder and leader, Adel ‘Abu Abbas’ Abdu Faree. Until the end of April 2019, they controlled neighborhoods of Taiz city and played authority roles parallel to the government.<sup>(7)</sup> Then it was combined, financially and administratively, with Armored Brigade 35, and redeployed in the Kaddahah area north-west of Taiz after violent confrontations with government forces in April 2019.

## The Nature and Causes of the UAE Withdrawal

Despite the sudden announcement of the reduction and redeployment of UAE forces in Yemen, no significant change has yet been made in the status of these forces, with three locations in the northern governorates; the Saudi forces have taken over control of them in Sarawah, Marib, and in al-Makha and Khokha on the Red Sea coast and deployed Patriot air defense batteries.<sup>(8)</sup> A week earlier, the Coast Guard command in Aden took over the island of Perim (Mayyun) in Bab al-Mandab.

The UAE forces stationed in the southern provinces are still in their bases, despite the transfer of tanks stationed in the port of Aden to the UAE command center in Brega. According to a new map, so far there

<sup>6</sup> “Special source: Coalition looking for an alternative to al-Muharrami in the leadership of the Giants’ Forces,” Masdar Online, 13/7/2019, accessed 15/7/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2JM10cH>

<sup>7</sup> “Final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen mandated by paragraph 6 of Security Council resolution 2402 (2018).”

<sup>8</sup> “Sources: UAE will hand over the headquarters of its operations in al-Makha to Saudi forces after the withdrawal from Khokha,” MAsdar Online, 8/7/2019, accessed 15/7/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2Y3Wx9K>

has been a reduction in the number of troops and a re-positioning of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, dictated by common interests and internal and regional circumstances that played a role in this decision. These circumstances include:

- Tension in the Gulf region due to the escalation of the US-Iranian dispute, accompanied by the sabotage of four oil tankers off the coast of Fujairah on 12 May 2019. The Iranians downed a US drone, believed to have been launched from a military base UAE. (9) The targeting of these ships may have prompted the UAE to review its tough policy towards Iran and its Houthi allies, fearing any potential confrontation with its economy, which is entirely dependent on the stability of the region.(10)
- There are Saudi-UAE understandings to share influence in Yemen, so that the UAE's influence is concentrated in Yemeni maritime areas linked to its security and economic interests, especially in the south and Bab al-Mandab.
- The absence of any prospects of resolving the conflict with the Houthis, after the failure of the Stockholm agreement.(11)
- Increased international pressure to stop the war in Yemen, and growing criticism of the Saudi and UAE roles because of the humanitarian tragedies caused by the continuation of the conflict.
- The rise of official and popular Yemeni rejection of the UAE a result of its practices in support of the secessionist forces and undermining the authority of the government.
- The UAE's preference for indirect support strategy, as the safest and least expensive option, to avoid bearing any more material, military and political losses, as well as reassurance to its internal allies, to carry out the field role by proxy, and leaving the anti-terrorism forces to remain as they are.(12)

## The Implications of the UAE Withdrawal

The most likely consequences of the withdrawal of UAE troops from Yemen can be identified as follows:

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9 Baher Hamza, "The Repercussions of the UAE Withdrawal from the War in Yemen on the Arab Alliance," *Middle East Morning*, 4/7/2019, accessed 15/7/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2XORjj2>

10 A few years ago, a security strategist warned of the vulnerability of UAE ports and ships to sabotage by small submarines and did not rule out Iran's possession of submarines. See: Paul Burke, *The Terrorist Threat to the Maritime Security of the UAE* (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2011).

11 Elana DeLozier, "UAE Drawdown May Isolate Saudi Arabia in Yemen," *Policy Analysis*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 3/7/2019, accessed 15/7/2019, at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/uae-drawdown-in-yemen-may-isolate-saudi-arabia>

12 Ibid



## Implications on the Ground

As a result of the security forces and the elite forces' reliance (especially the Shabwan) on Emirati support, their position on the ground may be affected in any attack by the Houthis on the areas of Lahj and Dhale. However, the impact will depend on the extent to which UAE warplanes continue to cover. The most visible impact in the northern regions (Al-Jawf, Sa'ada, Hajjah, Marib, al-Baidah, Hodeida and Taiz) may be due to the increasing burden on Saudi Arabia after the evacuation of the UAE forces in Marib and the Western Coast. This situation is further exacerbated by the shortage of heavy weapons in the Yemeni army. The coalition has not allowed the government army to obtain tanks, rocket-propelled grenades or aircraft.<sup>(13)</sup>

The government army leadership was able to lay its hands, in part, on the joint forces on the west coast. It can be expected that the Sarawah front in Marib will be restored after the departure of the UAE forces. Under the leadership of its commander, Major General Abd al-Rab al-Shadadi, who was killed in October 2016, it was one of the most active fronts, and one of the gates to enter Sana'a.

## The Repercussions for the Saudi - UAE Alliance

This withdrawal may put Saudi Arabia in a standoff against the Houthis, which could weaken its position or eventually lead them to acquiesce to their demands to stop the war and engage in a direct peace process.<sup>(14)</sup> The strategic performance of Saudi air and naval operations may be affected by the absence of its Emirati partner, for which it will not be able to find a regional alternative to compensate. Above all, the cost for Saudi Arabia will potentially double if the Houthis insist on continuing the war, as part of their long-term strategy, focusing their attacks on cities, industrial centers, oil and power generation in Jizan and Asir, Najran and other areas, and if Iran and Hezbollah continue their support, especially with ballistic missiles and drones.

## Conclusion

The UAE forces have been involved in the Arab alliance in Yemen since 2015. From the outset, the UAE focused on Aden, the famous historic port, the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea coasts, strategic islands such as Perim island (Mayyun) and Socotra. Therefore, during the last years of the war, their forces were stationed in these areas in an attempt to integrate their presence along the coast.

The declared goals of the alliance were to "restore the government and defeat the Houthi coup". Yet the UAE's strategy has gone beyond that by establishing and supporting armed militias independent of the government, some of them separatists, some tribal, some Salafist, and others led by warlords. These militias have become another obstacle to the return of government. Relations soured with

<sup>13</sup> "Watch the statements of Major General Mohsen Khosravi...", YouTube, 11/7/2019, accessed 15/7/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2NVqJQJ>

<sup>14</sup> Hamza



President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and the war escalated into a humanitarian catastrophe that led the UAE to withdraw quietly from some areas, especially in the north. This will probably not stop the war soon, but it will weigh heavily on Saudi Arabia as a result of the increased burdens of continuing it, and this alone could go beyond exacerbating the differences in attitudes and interests between the two allies.