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The UAE Withdraws from Yemen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A UAE decision to [withdraw the bulk of its forces from Yemen](#) shines a spotlight on hard realities underlying Middle Eastern geopolitics. The pullback suggests that the UAE is preparing for the possibility of a US military confrontation with Iran in which the UAE and Saudi Arabia could emerge as prime battlegrounds. It also reflects long-standing subtle differences in the approaches of Saudi Arabia and the UAE toward Yemen.

The UAE decision to pull out of Yemen highlights its concern for its international standing amid mounting criticism of the civilian toll of the war, as well as a recognition that the Trump administration's unquestioning support may not be enough to shield its allies from significant reputational damage.

The withdrawal constitutes a fine-tuning rather than a reversal of the UAE's determination to contain Iran and thwart political Islam. Witness the Emirates' involvement in the Libyan civil war and support for renegade Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar, as well as its support for the embattled Sudanese military and autocrats like Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

While the UAE may have withdrawn the bulk of its troops from key regions of Yemen, it leaves behind Emirati-trained local forces who will continue to do its bidding. [The withdrawal, moreover, is not 100%](#), with the UAE maintaining its Al-Mukalla base for counterterrorism operations.

The UAE's commitment to assertive policies designed to ensure that the small state can continue to punch above its weight is also evident in its maintenance [of a string of military and commercial port facilities in Yemen, on the African](#)

[shore of the Red Sea, and in the Horn of Africa](#), as well its hard line toward Qatar and rivalry with Turkey.

As part of its regional and international projection, the UAE is keen to maintain its status as a model for Arab youth and preferred country of residence.

The UAE's image contrasts starkly with that of Saudi Arabia, the custodian of Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest cities.

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman's policies, including the clampdown on domestic critics and the Yemen war, have prompted embarrassing [calls by prominent Islamic scholars for a boycott of the pilgrimage to Mecca](#), one of the five pillars of Islam.

Wittingly or unwittingly, the withdrawal leaves Saudi Arabia and Prince Muhammad – the instigator of the more than four-year long war, which has sparked one of the world's worst humanitarian crises – exposed.

Despite their differing objectives in Yemen, the UAE also suffered reputational fallout from bombings of civilian targets that were largely carried out by the Saudi rather than the Emirati air force.

Operating primarily in the north, Saudi Arabia focused on countering Iran-backed Houthi rebels whose stronghold borders on the kingdom. The UAE backed South Yemeni separatists and targeted Muslim Brotherhood-related groups.

With the withdrawal, the UAE may allow differences with Saudi Arabia to become more visible but will not put its alliance with the kingdom at risk. If past differences are anything to go by, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are able to manage them.

Their differences were evident in recent weeks with [the UAE, unlike Saudi Arabia, refraining from blaming Iran for attacks](#) on tankers in the Gulf of Oman.

Leaked emails written by Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE's influential ambassador in Washington, laid bare the [Emirates' strategy of working through the Saudi court](#) to achieve its regional objectives despite [viewing the kingdom as "cuckoo."](#)

Similarly, differences in the two countries' concept of Islam failed to rock their alliance despite the effective excommunication in 2016 of Saudi-backed ultra-conservatism at a UAE-sponsored conference in the Chechen capital of Grozny.

The alliance is key to the two countries' counterrevolution, which is aimed at maintaining the region's autocratic status quo in the face of almost a decade of popular revolts, public protests, and civil wars.

The UAE-Saudi-led counterrevolution is driven by Prince Muhammad and his UAE counterpart Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayed's desire to shape the Middle East in their mold.

The UAE rather than the kingdom was the driver behind the Qatar boycott, with Saudi King Muhammad and Prince Muhammad initially reaching out to the Qatar-backed Muslim Brotherhood when they came to power in 2015.

Four years later, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to radically shift gears but could prove less intransigent toward the group than the UAE.

While preparing for possible conflict with Iran may be the main driver for the withdrawal, it is unlikely to protect the UAE from damage to its reputation as a result of its involvement in Libya and Sudan as well as its draconian clampdown on dissent at home.

Haftar's UAE-armed forces are believed to be responsible for [the recent bombing of a detention center for African migrants in the Libyan capital Tripoli](#) that killed 40 and wounded 80 others.

The bombing came on the heels of a discovery of US-made missiles in one of Haftar's military bases packed in [shipping containers stating they belonged to the "UAE Armed Forces."](#) The UAE has denied ownership.

The UAE's withdrawal from Yemen will likely help it evade calls for Yemen-related arms embargoes.

Libya, however, could prove to be the UAE's Achilles' heel.

Said Robert Menendez, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in a letter to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo: "You are surely aware that if these allegations prove true you may be [obligated by law to terminate all arms sales to the UAE.](#)"

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