



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Is Yemen the Next Frontier for the Turkey-Russia Conflict?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Turkey and Russia are embroiled in separate proxy conflicts on multiple fronts in Syria and Libya, but could be on a collision course in the complex political landscape of Yemen. This can be avoided if Turkey does not try for an aggressive Islamist takeover and respects Russia's desire to share gas profits, exercise political influence with whatever factions end up dominating the sphere, and retain access to strategic waterways.

In a [recent video](#), Turkey-backed Syrian mercenaries fighting on behalf of Tripoli's internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, aided by local Islamist militias, are seen saying, "We are just getting started. The target is going to be Gaza." They further state that they want to take on President Sisi of Egypt and to go to Yemen.

In an unexpected turn of events, the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and supported by Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Russia, France, and, less overtly, Israel, suddenly fled Tripoli, effectively returning the entire city and nearby areas to GNA control.

Within days, Egypt, at a press conference with Haftar, called for a ceasefire and a peace initiative toward reintegrating Libya—a call that went unanswered by the GNA. The day after the announcement, Egypt was seeing moving trucks and heavy weaponry to the Egypt-Libya border in an effort to show its willingness to take all measures to protect its national security interests from being infringed upon by the GNA-Turkey-Qatar alliance, which is backed by Italy and, symbolically, by the US.

Pro-LNA activists stated that Egypt would also be raising its level of support for the LNA, though it is not yet clear what that means. This development follows an

unexplainable series of other defeats by both the LNA and the Russian Wagner Group mercenaries.

In response to [losing](#) nine Pantsir missile defense systems, the Russians escalated by bringing in jet planes. Turkey was also seen [importing](#) heavy weaponry into the Turkish-influenced Idlib area in Syria as the Russians resumed air strikes against Turkey-backed Syrian rebels.

Not only are the members of the Anti-Terrorism Quartet fighting proxy wars against the Islamist bloc on multiple fronts in the Middle East and Africa, but it appears that Russia and Turkey are likewise squaring off in multiple countries simultaneously. While the outcomes in Syria and Libya are not yet clear as Damascus finalizes the consolidation of territorial control over the country, Russia has the advantage in Syria of being allied with Assad's forces and, despite their differences, Iran. It's anyone's guess what would happen if Yemen were to follow the same trajectory.

And while Ankara has been asking for financial support from various countries, it is too early to rule out the possibility that it will invest financing it does not yet have in another conflict. Turkey can likely rely on its funder Qatar's willingness to fuel the fires wherever possible and embroil its regional adversaries in endless asymmetrical and media wars.

Indeed, there is evidence pointing to an aggressive approach by Turkey to involvement in Yemen. Its activities are more in line with Turkey's previous soft-power approach to relationship management than with the impulsive, scandalous, and bellicose activities that have backfired on Erdoğan in Syria, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Libya.

In Yemen, Turkey's presence is focused on the [three coastal areas](#). The strategic chokepoints of Bab Al-Mandeb and the Gulf of Aden remain the coveted prizes that multiple countries, including Iran and Russia, have an eye on.

Turkey has been trying to maneuver among the parties involved in the multiple conflicts brewing in Yemen, and is possibly courting the internationally recognized Hadi government for approval and support. Yemen's government is formally working with the Saudi-led Arab Coalition, which would not look kindly upon such overtures.

The Hadi administration has been accused of corruption and infiltration by Islamist elements. It has even worked with the Muslim Brotherhood Islah party and military brigade, which has [collaborated](#) with the Iran-backed Houthi separatists, causing [friction and miscommunication](#) within the Arab Coalition. Erdoğan would almost certainly be seeking to exploit any Islamist ties and sympathies, even working alongside Qatar to entice such elements into joining the [emerging Islamist bloc](#).

Still, Turkey's current maneuvers around Shabwa, Socotra, and Mukha in Taiz are bound to raise eyebrows. Socotra in particular is considered to be in the sphere of influence of the UAE, which adamantly opposes Turkish interference in the region. Following Iran's increased aggression in the region and the oil tanker crisis in the summer of 2019, the UAE decreased its military involvement in Yemen to the point that it was [accused](#) of running away and abandoning Saudi Arabia—but it [remains](#) culturally and financially influential in Socotra.

However, Qatari media and lobbies have mobilized Islamist-leaning locals against UAE-backed separatists and others more sympathetic to the goals of the Arab Coalition, and those are the elements to which Turkey speaks. As it did in its approach to Africa and the Indian subcontinent, Turkey has invested heavily in humanitarian outreach to its potential Yemeni supporters via the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Organization (IHH). The IHH has been active in the area (Shabwa) ever since—following the withdrawal by the UAE of most of its forces—it fell largely under the control of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2019. The idea is to spread Islamist control through the Alam region in southwest Yemen, where Islamist tribes and militias are increasingly pushing back against the Arab Coalition.

This pushback included a series of mortar attacks aimed at food and medical supply lines that forced Coalition forces to retreat. While the Coalition-backed forces appear to be increasingly splintered over their differences regarding their long-term goals for the country, including a recent episode in which Southern Separatist Movement forces claimed [sole control](#) over Aden, causing controversy and havoc within the Coalition, the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to exploit the ideological and physical vacuum of power in the absence of a Coalition presence in Alam to push onward to the strategically important Port of Balhaf. There, the Islamists would gain control of the important gas exports (serving Turkey's goal of decreasing energy dependence on other countries). This would give them physical access to the coast overlooking the Arabian Sea, which would be an important point of entry for any future military involvement by Turkey.

While Erdoğan is exploiting political tensions, he is known to be courting Socotra Governor Ramzi Mahrous, who is reported to have met with Turkish and Qatari intelligence in Istanbul.

Turkey is also using al-Islah to infiltrate the educational system, religious institutions, and other social infrastructure in Yemen, using Qatari textbooks and Turkish expertise in ideological influence to radicalize the local population.

And what about Russia? For the past several years, Moscow has trodden the ground in Yemen very carefully, playing all sides and even providing [formal humanitarian influence](#) to retain access and open dialogue with whoever ends up on top. Russia's

goal is more complex than Turkey's in that it is not seeking to openly declare itself on anyone's side in the conflict. As with Syria, Russia sees itself as a potentially influential power broker among the many splintered actors. It seeks to be perceived as a political mediator, though there is no sure path to becoming a kingmaker and obtaining direct control or more broad and unifying influence (for the time being).

While Moscow is not openly choosing sides between Hadi/Coalition forces and the Houthis or even al-Islah, it remains in dialogue with all parties without antagonizing any group through militant interference. For Russia, the outcome in Yemen is less important than its ability to advance its agenda by gaining access to potential military bases in the strategic chokepoints, gaining political influence overall, managing gas exports, and being able to leverage its role in Yemen toward a greater regional role and involvement.

In theory, so long as Turkey respects these boundaries and does not conflict with Russia over its interests, the two countries can pursue their goals side by side, especially as there is no clear winner right now. However, should Turkey advance more aggressively to impose Islamist control and intervene militarily, and should it attempt to oust Russia from a leading or influential role in Yemen due to a clash of interests or in response to the non-resolution of tensions in Syria or Libya, another proxy conflict could occur.

Will Russia join with the Hadi government and the Arab Coalition or with the Houthis? That will depend on who Russia ultimately sees as the likely winner.

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