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Cautious Policies:

# The Future of Emirati-Iranian Relationships in Light of the Latest Houthi Attacks

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It seems that the war in Yemen began to take a more complex curve after the Iran-backed Houthis adopted new field strategies of activating specific policies based upon “external targets”. This is in light of the Houthi attacks on 17th and 24th Jan 2022 against a number of civilian and industrial Emirati facilities in addition to the recent declaration by the Joint Operations Command of the UAE Ministry of Defence about destroying a ballistic missile launch platform in the Yemeni governorate of Al-Jawf. A missile was intercepted and destroyed in the UAE Sunday evening on Jan 30th 2022<sup>1</sup>.

All those moves are indicators about a counter/retaliatory reaction against the path of the field operations in Yemen, especially in South and the moves of the “Southern Giants Brigades”. All of these dynamics push us to analyze the dimensions and the indicators related to these attacks and their subsequent ramifications, whether at regional or international levels.

This comes in conjunction with a cautious breakthrough between Iran and Gulf states. It is worth mentioning that there are ongoing talks to "reduce tension" with KSA and UAE. Moreover, there are Iranian-international negotiation tours about reviving the Nuclear Deal and making amendments on its 2015 version (5+1).

## **First: The dimensions and motives of the Houthi attacks against the UAE**

After years of indirect appeasement following the UAE withdrawal from Yemen in 2019, the Houthis claimed their responsibility of targeting the Abu Dhabi Airport, an oil facility and a number of other civil goals by using missiles and drones.

This carries specific indicators which signal a change in the nature of the battle between the Arab Coalition and the Houthis based upon the following motives:

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<sup>1</sup> UAE: Destruction of a ballistic missile launched by the terrorist Houthi group, [Sky News Arabia](#)

1- The vital developments of the military scene in Yemen, especially after the success made by the “Giants Brigades” in undermining the Houthi moves in South Yemen, and especially in Shabwa as well as besieging the Houthi activity after seizing parts of Marib, the last main bastion of the Internationally-recognized Government (IRG) in North Yemen.

2-Re-evaluating the UAE’s engagement in Yemen: This follows the activation of the Arab Coalition's field moves in light of joint strategic/tactical coordination between the US and the UAE. For example, the "coordination print" has been clear in relying upon joint operations cells in the Ataq Airport in Shabwa as well as the joint coordination to support "the qualitative value/the preferential weight of the forces" such as the "Giants Brigades".

3- Enhancing the "parallel regime" approach: The Houthis seek to make this by using a tactical way and systematic steps. This began with targeting the national state and the subsequent gradual steps towards weakening and converting it into a "a non-state through successive attrition operations in the context of the ongoing conflict and internal crises. The Houthis, as -a non-state actor- present themselves as a political alternative. This represents one of the chapters of the political complexity in the paths of the solution to the Yemeni file. It became illogical to limit the "internal/external" Houthi moves to their roles in the regional proxy war. It is important to re-evaluate the "identity of the role" and the group's aspirations, given its establishment of parallel institutions to the institutions of the national state.

## **Secondly- The impact of the Houthi attack on the future of the Emirati policies:**

There are a number of tests which are likely to be considered by the UAE policies in the future, given the latest Houthi attack as a retaliatory behaviour for the UAE's reinvolvement in the ongoing battles in Yemen.

This raises more questions about first: the future of the UAE policies towards Yemen, and whether Abu Dhabi will continue supporting its allies in Yemen to thwart the Houthi moves in North and South, or it will retract its steps due to fears of economic and regional losses from these attacks. Will the UAE back away from some of its foreign policies based on its adopted tendency to reduce involvement in regional conflicts and look inward.

The second one is the future of UAE's policies toward Iran which is the top political, military and economic backer of the Houthis. This is also related to the future of the mutual talks between the two parties about "reducing the escalation" of the region's turmoil. This could be clarified through the following points:

### **1- The future of the UAE-Yemeni policies:**

There is a number of "direct and indirect" different incentives for the UAE's involvement in Yemen through the following points:

- Direct incentives: which are represented in the following elements: endorsing and supporting the IRG, restoring the National state institutions, confronting and undermining the "terrorist" and extremist groups such as the AQAP and ISIS as well as the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood? All of those groups take the Yemeni turmoil as a haven and an incubating environment for re-positioning in the region after it receded in other countries. The direct incentives also include securing the international navigation lines and besieging the Iranian influence and its prospects for expanding the Shiite in the region.
- Indirect incentives: Despite the Emirati declaration in July 2019 about reducing and re-deploying its forces in Yemen, to shift from the "military power first" strategy to the "peace first" strategy,<sup>2</sup> the change towards re-positioning the UAE within the Arab Coalition

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<sup>2</sup> UAE announces shifting from "military force strategy" to "peace first" in Yemen, [France 24](#), 7/8/2019.

forces, and its support for the “Giants Brigades” and other parties inside Yemen push for reconsidering the possibilities of Abu Dhabi’s continuous involvement in the Yemeni issue given the following considerations:

A- At the political level: The UAE has sought through its external moves to enhance the notion of the “logistic state” in the regional interactions circle. This has been tested in all foreign moves by building regional and international partnerships aimed at undermining the centers of turmoil in the region, top of which is “Yemen”, which is of geopolitical importance to the UAE. The “political threats” have come to be seen as “security/existential threats”.

For example, within the framework of its partnerships with the Arab Coalition, the UAE seeks to strengthen applying what has become known as the “logistical state” by training and supporting provincial entities and parties that qualify them to play a political and security role in support of the political settlement process in the Yemeni issue, in light of the aspirations of regional and international moves in the possible peace process.

B- At the political level: the UAE seeks to consolidate its presence to secure its existence on the decision-making tables and be aware of the Yemeni files of utmost economic priority for its national security.

## **2- The future of the UAE-Iran policies:**

The future of the UAE-Iranian relationships is likely to pass through critical tests following the latest attacks on Abu Dhabi given the historical experience in 2019, and the conclusion of the Houthi declaration about claiming the responsibility of the attacks that targeted oil facilities in KSA and the subsequent evidence that indicated that Iran was the source of this attack. Such tests are based on the following information:

- Building on the conditionalities of “reconfiguring” the UAE-Iranian relationships, and evaluating the Houthi dilemma as being one of the most important Iranian proxies in the region, in addition to the Iranian material and military support of the Houthis and providing them with drones and ballistic missiles.

For example, there is a number of reports that monitor the various visits of the chief Houthi negotiator, Mohammed Abd Al Salam, to Tehran, and his meeting with President Ibrahim Raisi and the Secretary-General of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani.

- The summary of the future UAE-Iranian relationships is based on the principle of “openness to the rivals”. Thus, there is a need to point to the mutual negotiations<sup>3</sup> that began during the past months to “reduce escalation” in the region. It is likely to continue based on the pragmatic vision and the most realistic Emirati view of the extent of change in the dynamics of the interaction’s circles in the region, provided that the negotiating table includes an item related to the nature of the Houthi attacks on civilian targets and Emirati industrial facilities and ways to besiege and deter them.
- Counting on the economic card: This is based upon the different trajectories of the economy and the commerce between the UAE and Iran which was always connected with immense networks of commercial, economic and investment relationships. Moreover, this includes the movement of people and goods through the intersecting shipping lanes, as this volume exceeded the figures related to Iranian trade with the other five members of the Gulf Cooperation Council.<sup>4</sup> Dubai, in particular, have become an important hub for re-exportation and an outlet for the global economy in light of the international sanctions against Iran. Abu Dhabi is the fourth largest destination for Iranian non-oil exports, with a total value of \$2.9

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<sup>3</sup> Tahnoun Bin Zayed’s visit to Iran.. Cooperation and Stability in the Region is UAE’s Priority ([al-ain.com](http://al-ain.com))

<sup>4</sup> Nader Habibi, “The Impact of Sanctions on Iran-GCC Economic Relations,” Middle East Brief, no. 45, Brandies University Crown Center for Middle East Studies (2010).

billion<sup>5</sup>. This can be illustrated through the announced statistics about the volume of trade exchange between the UAE and Iran, according to the following figure:

Figure (1) a statement of the latest announced statistics about exports and imports between the UAE and Iran (2015 - 2019), value in million dollars.

Item	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Exports	10,814,281	8,810,493	15,270,369	10,234,278	7,084,010
Imports	764,978	968,593	1,855,077	5,035,453	1,235,103
Trade Balance	10,049,303	7,841,900	13,415,292	5,198,825	5,848,907

Source: Trade Map, <https://bit.ly/3ITWKA1>

It is worth mentioning that the pattern of the UAE's economic developments makes the leadership in Abu Dhabi subjected to regional destabilization risks. Thus, the Emirati power assertiveness tendency towards Iran has declined. This comes along with normalization of the UAE-Israel relationships and what will be built on it in the future within the framework of the depth of political, economic and security ties between them.<sup>6</sup>

### Thirdly: possible trajectories:

The different Houthi attacks against the UAE which is considered a qualitative shift towards Abu Dhabi since the beginning of "Operation Decisive Storm" in 2015 until the UAE's declaration to withdraw from Yemen-reveal a number of potential trajectories which in turn could shape the future of the political and field process in Yemen, in addition to the path of some regional and international understandings as illustrated below:

<sup>5</sup> Mohammad Barhouma, The Reshaping of UAE Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Strategy, [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#), January 04, 2022, Middle East Studies (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Elham Fakhro, "What the Abraham Accords Reveal about the United Arab Emirates," [War on the Rocks](#), 30/10/2020, accessed on 13/12/2021

## - **The political trajectory**

Regarding this trajectory, we count on the future of a number of political arrangements related to the peaceful settlement of the Yemeni issue, which had begun to reproduce their steps given the stalemate in the peace process in Yemen. This is connected with following points:

1- The future of the international moves and the activities of the Fourth Envoy to Yemen “Hans Grundberg” who for example met with the Saudi Deputy Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman to discuss the peace process in Yemen.

2- The future of resuming the activities of the “Economic Quad” including the UK, US, KSA, and the UAE, and the nature of its role in light of its tendency to stop the current escalation, similar to its role in the Stockholm Agreement of 2018, signed between the IRG and the Houthi group, regarding Hodeidah. The qualitative shift in the American evaluation of the Houthis should not be ignored as the US announced that it is reconsidering the decision to remove the Houthis from the Terrorist List, endorsed by President Joe Biden in February 2021<sup>7</sup>.

3- The UAE’s exploitation of its non-permanent membership in the Security Council during the period 2022-2023 to reach an international and regional consensus for the right to respond to the Houthi attack, and to defend itself in accordance with the rules of international law. This is in accordance with Resolution No. 8725 of the League of Arab States at the level of delegates of member states, in its Extraordinary Session, held on January 23, 2022<sup>8</sup>.

4- The results of the “Triple Summit” held in Abu Dhabi on Jan 26th 2022 between the leaders of Egypt, the UAE and Bahrain in which Cairo supported the right of Abu Dhabi for self-defence.

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<sup>7</sup> The United States Government, [Executive Order 13224](#)

<sup>8</sup> Resolution [No. 8725 issued by the meeting of the Council of the League](#) of Arab States at the level of permanent delegates in its Extraordinary Session (Cairo: January 23, 2022)

### - **The field trajectory**

It seems that the non-decisiveness status will continue to lead the main scene of the Yemeni issue, given the change in the Houthis' tactics in the conflict towards external targets. On the other hand, this brings back the vital role of the Arab Coalition in Yemen. This has been tested through the depth of the latest moves in South Yemen.

Despite the limited human and material losses of the Houthi attacks against the UAE, the various repercussions of the attack were heavier at various economic, security and political levels, which could be used as a "new window" for the Coalition to rearrange its field deployment and confront the Houthis in Yemen. This hypothesis is supported by the pressure of the international community to push the Houthis towards dialogue on the paths of a political settlement with the expected peace process.

### - **The regional trajectory**

This trajectory is built on the future of Iranian-Gulf understandings which are likely to be reconsidered in light of the latest Houthi attacks. This will have an impact on the path of the understandings with the KSA and the UAE, especially that the "Emirati target centers" completely differ from the KSA's ones. Despite the importance of Riyadh as it represents a religious dimension in the region, the UAE represents the "winning card" by "escalation strategies" due to its being a hub for trade and investment in the region, in addition to its openness to regional and international tourism, in addition to its small area.

This makes the Houthi attacks - with Iranian green light - more influential for the path of Tehran-Gulf understandings as one of the Iranian pressure cards in determining the trajectory of understandings with the Gulf states. If the Houthi attacks continue, this may have a negative impact on international investments in Abu Dhabi and Dubai and on the overall business of the Gulf stock exchange and Gulf oil prices. On the

other hand, it is worth mentioning that going too far in such attacks could complicate the path of those understandings, especially that the UAE is of geopolitical importance for Iran, and the escalation of the attacks will harm the joint interests of the two states.

The UAE may be forced to make political and diplomatic escalations against Iran, such as expelling the Iranian Ambassador, boycotting Iranian products, and freezing economic cooperation. Such cards will have a significant negative impact on Iranian interests in the region, in parallel with the continuing dilemma of negotiating the revival of the Iranian Nuclear Deal. Additionally, the problem of the divergent consequences of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran will continue.

#### - **The international trajectory**

This trajectory is based on the dilemma of the Iran Nuclear Deal and the future of the ongoing negotiations about it, especially that Iran is keen to return to the same version of the Nuclear Deal without any modification or new conditions. Thus, the “Houthi attacks” are considered one of the Iranian barter cards regarding the Middle East’s security and stability in return for imposing its aspirations towards the ongoing talks to make progress in its own agenda, top of which is its desire for political guarantees to lift economic sanctions and prevent their recurrence.

The “international negotiation cards” of the Iranian nuclear file are likely to be re-evaluated based on the qualitative transformations in the “security equations” in the region through the attacks by the Houthis who are one of the most important Iranian arms in the region. The future course of negotiations will be contingent on Iran's employment of all its tools in the region to achieve its own agendas.

**Accordingly**, the future of the UAE-Iran relationships is more likely to be determined, in light of the latest developments through the Houthi escalation towards Abu Dhabi, within the framework of a number of qualitative

trajectories. **The first one** is the Houthi response to pacification efforts and accepting the dialogue as a prelude to achieve the requirements of the “political settlement”. This trajectory is dependent on a number of considerations, mainly the international efforts, the future of the UN and the US envoys to Yemen, and the resumption of the Omani political mediation role. We should not overlook the various effects of reproducing the Arab Coalition’s field role within the ongoing conflict.

**The second one** is based upon the future of Emirati-Iranian understandings. This is conditioned with Tehran’s ability to pressurize the Houthis to stop their attacks against Gulf external targets to pave the way for resuming the path of the understandings between them.

**The third one** is relevant with the American re-evaluation of the Houthis’ political and security status. This is in accordance with Resolution No. "13224" regarding "terrorist persons/entities".

**The Fourth one** is connected to what can be achieved and built upon through the international talks to revive the Iranian Nuclear Deal. Those trajectories have become too tangled and complicated, as all of them are intersected in the political settlement (peace process) of the Yemeni issue.

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*Cover image: UAE National Security Adviser Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed meets in the Iranian capital, Ali Shamkhani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, December 6, 2021 (Credit: ATTA KENARE/AFP via Getty Images)*

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