

Gulf Allies Could Prove Key in US Plans in Yemen



Gulf Allies Could Prove Key in US Plans in Yemen

Elham A. Omar

April 21, 2025

Cover photo: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed pose prior to a meeting in Abu Dhabi on December 7, 2021 // Photo by the Saudi Press Agency.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

On March 15, US President Donald Trump ordered a series of “**decisive and powerful**” airstrikes targeting Yemen’s Houthis in response to the group’s attacks on commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea. The operation marks the **most significant US military engagement** in the Middle East since Trump retook office, with the stated aims of degrading Houthi capabilities and sending a clear message to their Iranian allies.

Trump’s escalation has heightened tensions with Iran, risking a broader confrontation. Meanwhile, regional reactions to the strikes have been shaped by states’ interests, alliances, and the ripple effects of the ongoing conflict in Gaza. The UAE, which backs powerful military groups in southern Yemen, has a history of supporting a hawkish approach to the Houthis. Saudi Arabia had been pursuing a settlement with the group, but the Red Sea attacks shelved those plans. Yemen’s internationally recognized government continues to suffer not just from the war but from the division and competition between its rival Gulf backers and their respective proxy forces. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have significant stakes in the US intervention, but their willingness to support a sustained campaign or to act in concert remains unclear.

A Common Enemy

Trump bolstered ties with Gulf allies to counter Iran during his first term and has returned to that strategy, seeking cooperation with “**regional partners**” to put pressure on the Houthis and their primary backer, Tehran. Trump’s **redesignation** of the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in January was firmly in line with the Emirati position on the group: In December 2023, **Bloomberg reported** that the UAE had urged the US to redesignate the Houthis and favored military action, even as Saudi Arabia sought to preserve a fragile truce.

The new US administration has made it clear it wants to disentangle itself from conflicts in the Middle East, but this policy could be put to the test if the campaign against the Houthis drags on. The Houthis have proven their adaptability over the years, withstanding Saudi-led coalition airstrikes from 2015 to 2022 and US-UK airstrikes over the past year. The possibility of a US-backed ground offensive involving anti-Houthi forces is now reportedly being considered amid **reports** that the air campaign alone (the total cost of which reportedly exceeded **US\$1 billion** in less than a month) has so far been ineffective in neutralizing the Houthis’ ability to threaten the Red Sea.

President Trump’s threat to completely “**annihilate**” the group would likely require leaning on regional partners, most notably the UAE, given its previous operational experience on the ground and robust proxy network. Potential cooperation might entail US air support to UAE-backed forces, particularly the Joint Forces on the West Coast, which might renew pressure on the strategic Houthi-held port of Hudaydah – a key hub for arms smuggling as well as imported goods. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has adopted a border stability-driven approach to Yemen since 2022, seeking a deal with the Houthis to facilitate its exit from Yemen and ensure that no missiles are fired into the kingdom. While hedging its bets, it could still be convinced to join a US-led effort against the group if given certain guarantees, with regional diplomatic sources **saying** a new offensive against Hudayah could involve Saudi naval support.

Emirati Ambitions

With the White House emphasizing cooperation, could the UAE emerge as a key ally in Yemen? **Abu Dhabi** has not leapt at the chance or publicly endorsed the US airstrikes. However, its historical stance suggests that it may view Trump's aggressiveness favorably. The UAE's direct military engagement in Yemen showed it was capable of threatening Houthi strongholds. It trained some **90,000 fighters** in southern Yemen to combat the Houthis and recapture Aden in 2015. UAE-backed forces nearly took Hudaydah during an offensive in 2018 before it was halted due to **international pressure and humanitarian concerns**. Although the UAE **scaled back** its direct military involvement in Yemen in 2019, with a phased withdrawal completed by early 2020, its influence remains strong. It continues to support anti-Houthi factions, notably the Southern Transitional Council (STC), Giants Brigades, and National Resistance forces, part of the Joint Forces on the West Coast. The UAE-backed Giants Brigades **pushed** the Houthis out of Shabwa and thwarted their attempts to seize Marib in early 2022. Trump's backing might revive Emirati ambitions for greater influence. Meanwhile, the UAE's ally, STC President Aiderous al-Zubaidi, welcomed Trump's return to the White House, calling it a "**decisive turning point**" in efforts to combat the Houthis, indicating hopes of closer US-UAE cooperation against the group.

A key focus of the UAE's policy has been securing strategic maritime assets, including the Bab-al-Mandab Strait, a critical chokepoint for global maritime trade, including **oil**. The UAE maintains influence over Yemeni islands like Socotra and Mayyun, and has acquired stakes in ports and established military bases in the Horn of Africa. Such assets could serve as forward operating bases for air and naval operations. For example, a recently constructed **airstrip** on Mayyun enhances the UAE's ability to respond rapidly to threats and project power due to its proximity to Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen – an advantage that could facilitate coordination with the US while securing the UAE's long-term interests. Abu Dhabi's influence in the waterway has been directly contested by the Houthis, both via their attacks on shipping through the strait and their increasing projection of naval power. Thus, US airstrikes on the Houthis indirectly help the UAE's economic ambitions, which have become increasingly intertwined with its military objectives throughout its engagement in Yemen.

Counterterrorism is another potential pillar of US-UAE policy synergy. The UAE has skillfully leveraged the threat of terrorism as a tool of diplomacy, employing it to extend its influence and legitimize the expansion of its proxies. Following the 2015 launch of Operation Decisive Storm, the Saudi-led coalition's effort to oust the Houthis, the US **provided** drone support and intelligence to Emirati-backed security forces, which successfully dislodged Al-Qaeda from **Mukalla** in Hadramawt and other southern strongholds. The US has also provided **backing** to the UAE's efforts to recruit, train, and retain local forces in Yemen, such as Security Belt forces in Aden, Abyan, and Lahj, the Elite forces in Hadramawt, and the Elite and Defense forces in Shabwa, which have engaged in direct combat with Al-Qaeda at various points in the conflict. The UAE's past cooperation with the US military's Central Command to target Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula using local proxies could presumably be **expanded** to include Houthi targets.

However, the UAE has also made **diplomatic overtures** to Iran since 2019, hinting at a pragmatic approach to safeguarding its economic interests in contrast to Trump's strategy of "**maximum pressure**." Abu Dhabi may wish to avoid a full-scale regional escalation that could lead to new Houthi **strikes** and disrupt its economic priorities, including trade with Iran, reportedly worth some **US\$25.7 billion**. Recent speculation about the UAE **hosting** US-Iran negotiations (before they moved to **Oman**) could also indicate Abu Dhabi's desire to maintain ties with Tehran, which might temper its enthusiasm for escalation against the Houthis.

Saudi Calculations

When the UAE joined the Saudi-led coalition to counter the Houthis in 2015, it was propelled into the role of Yemen's second-largest military player. While Abu Dhabi framed its military involvement through a national security lens, the crisis was more pressing for Saudi Arabia, which shares a long border with Houthi-controlled territory. Despite continued military cooperation against the Houthis over the last decade, both parties' underlying aspirations have shifted away from the initial, publicly stated aim of supporting Yemen's internationally recognized government. Instead, each has increasingly prioritized its own strategic interests.

If Saudi and Emirati strategies in Yemen continue to diverge, it could complicate matters considerably for the US. In particular, Saudi Arabia's focus on its border and its recent **rapprochement** with Iran may complicate its position. Wary of reigniting its **costly** military campaign against the Houthis, and possibly lacking faith in a US commitment to **defend** the kingdom, Riyadh has so far remained silent on the US strikes, perhaps signaling a preference for deescalation. Bilateral Saudi-Houthi talks began in 2022 as Riyadh sought to **negotiate** its exit from the Yemeni conflict, and it may still hope to revive the talks. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia may seek to maintain a neutral stance while the US targets Houthis militarily as part of a calculated play to benefit from the group's losses without destabilizing its border or risking being targeted by retaliatory drone and missile strikes.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia may double down on its efforts to counter the UAE's influence in Yemen. This **rivalry** has played out most directly in the oil-rich governorate of Hadramawt, while **divisions** between Saudi- and UAE-backed members of the government have often paralyzed decision-making. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have also found themselves on opposite sides of other regional conflicts, such as in Sudan and Libya, with Saudi Arabia generally leaning toward a restrained approach compared to the UAE's aggressive interventionism. Gaza's unresolved war also remains a complex issue that could reshape dynamics, with the Houthis vowing to continue their military actions in the Red Sea and against Israeli targets. UAE normalized relations with Israel as part of the **Abraham Accords** during Trump's first term in 2020, and has been engaged in behind-the-scenes discussions with US and Israeli officials about a **post-war plan** for Gaza. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, seems more likely to maintain its **traditional** leadership role in the Arab and Islamic worlds, **rejecting** Trump's Gaza displacement plan and making normalization with Israel contingent on the creation of a Palestinian state.

A New US Push for Cooperation?

Since returning to office in January, Trump has unleashed a mandate for decisive action against the Houthis, which is also seen as a clear **message** to deter Iran. Given that airstrikes alone are unlikely to neutralize the Houthi threat to shipping, the next step may be high-impact operations (including a possible ground offensive) that would emphasize cooperation with regional partners and avoid US boots on the ground in line with Trump's "America First" foreign policy promise.

While the US seeks, and likely requires, the support of the UAE and Saudi Arabia if it is to succeed in its efforts to degrade and destroy the Houthis' military capabilities, its Gulf allies have pursued different strategies since they entered the war in Yemen in 2015. The UAE withdrew its forces but remains the primary power in the south through its support for a number of military groups. Saudi Arabia has transitioned from airstrikes to negotiations, and while it remains the senior partner in the alliance, it projects less power on the ground. The positions of both countries on the US airstrikes persist in uncertainty. Renewed upheaval might jeopardize the UAE's dominant position in the south and a Saudi desire for a negotiated settlement.

To date, both countries have appeared cautious. On March 19, Emirati National Security Adviser Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan **visited** the White House to meet Trump and US officials. While the visit officially focused on economic partnerships, the timing, days after the renewed US strikes on Yemen began, suggests broader strategic discussions also took place. There are **reports** that Saudi Arabia, in concert with other Gulf states, has refused to allow the US to use its airspace in a direct attack against Iran. But Gulf countries' respective stances on the Houthi strikes remain unclear and could rapidly shift if the military and political situation in Yemen changes. While the Biden administration's **push** to mend the Saudi-Emirati rift in 2023 was driven by concerns over terrorism and safeguarding its interests in the region, Trump may yet try to force Saudi-UAE alignment to prioritize Houthi containment. Their embrace or rejection of these efforts will have far-reaching effects on the future of Yemen.

Elham A. Omar is an independent writer and researcher focused on Yemen and the region. She holds an MBA from Lincoln University in Oakland, California.

This analysis is part of a series of publications produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The series explores issues within economic, political, and environmental themes, aiming to inform discussion and policymaking related to Yemen that foster sustainable peace. Any views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.



WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG