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UAE'S MILITARY PRIORITIES IN YEMEN: COUNTERTERRORISM AND THE SOUTH

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Fighting al-Qaida before the Huthis”: the United Arab Emirates (Uae) have recently rebalanced their military commitment in Yemen, prioritizing counterterrorism operations against jihadi groups, in particular with regard to al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (Aqap). Since March 2015, the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen against Zaydi Shia militias (the Huthis of Ansarullah, plus former president Ali Abdullah Saleh’s loyalists) has been marking a watershed for Gulf monarchies’ military projection outside their boundaries. In the Yemeni campaign, the role of the Uae have raised in terms of leadership and resources, especially for ground operations.

The centrality of Aden - Reconstruction, commercial interests and maritime security concerns are the vectors of Uae’s engagement in Yemen, which focuses on the strategic city of Aden. The stabilization of Aden is crucial not only for intra-Yemeni balances, but also for anti-jihadi and anti-piracy efforts in the highly unstable Aden’s regional security complex, which involves the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (Emirati forces back anti-Huthi militias near al-Mokha) and the Horn of Africa. In this regard, the Uae signed in May 2015 a security partner-

ship agreement with Eritrea in order to use Eritrean land, water and airspace for military maneuvers in Yemen. Assab has been transformed into a naval logistic hub for Uae’s amphibious operations and strike sorties start from the Asmara International Airport. After Shia militias’ setback, Aden is still far from stabilization, pockets of jihadi resistance remain in the city and terrorist attacks occur on a weekly basis.

The four Uae's security dimensions in Yemen - From 2015 onwards, the Uae have been intervening in Yemen focusing on four security dimensions: regime stability, counterterrorism, local training and humanitarian assistance.

After Ansarullah’s coup, Abu Dhabi joined the Saudi-led coalition carrying out airstrikes against Shia militias (March 2015) to restore the legitimate transitional government. In May 2015, Emiratis started to head *de facto* coalition’s ground operations in the south of Yemen, with the purpose to regain the control of Aden, seized by Northern insurgents. To do so, special units of the Emirati Presidential Guard were deployed, together with some draft soldiers. Emirati forces still guard the



airport and the Presidential palace notwithstanding a troop reduction since late 2015. The appointment of two shuyyukh from the al-Dhale governorate, Shelal Ali Shayea and Aydrous al-Zubaidi, respectively as Aden's head of security and governor was promoted by the Uae, confirming Abu Dhabi's prominent role in post-conflict management.

Challenging Aqap in Mukalla - Since 2016, the counterterrorism dimension has been acquiring a primary role in Uae's operations in Yemen, contributing to spin Emirati public narrative on the Yemeni war. In March 2016, Saudi and Emirati airstrikes have begun to target jihadi bases and training camps in Mukalla (Hadhramaut), Abyan and some Aden's districts. In Yemen, Aqap and the Yemeni *wilaya* of the so-called Islamic State are rival in Yemen, but Aqap has here the upper hand, having replaced the old *shari'a*-oriented pattern of governance with a new community-centered one. As a matter of fact, Aqap succeeded in establishing a safe haven in Mukalla (as in coastal Abyan, between Jaar and Zinjibar). By exploiting the security vacuum and capitalizing on local resentment against central authorities, Aqap has forged tribal alliances and provided welfare. Due to a ground offensive in April 2016, Aqap opted for a tactical withdrawal from Mukalla, avoiding open confrontation with a coordinated front which encompassed the Yemeni army, Sunni tribal militias, Uae's units and few U.S. soldiers. The Uae are the only GCC country with real experience in counterinsurgency operations as Emiratis joined Nato-Isaf mission in Afghanistan, fighting alongside Jordanian forces in the Kandahar province, the core of Taliban's Helmand insurgency.

Local training and assistance - Beyond hard security tasks, Abu Dhabi's special forces are widely committed to the training of locals. In this regard, they work with both regular security forces and tribal militias that are willing to oppose insurgents or jihadists. In Aden, Uae's units coordinated the enrollment of locals in the police and in the army. Moreover, since autumn 2015 Abu Dhabi has introduced a training program for Yemeni

pilots at al-Anad base (Lahij province), with Uae-provided AT-802. To secure the post-Aqap Mukalla, the Uae have just organized the Hadhrami Elite forces, funded by Saudi Arabia and technically supported by United States' forces. Trained by Emirati and Jordanian security officers, the Hadhrami Elite encompasses local tribal fighters and given the alliances fluidity, the presence of former "Sons of Hadhramaut" members (the local Aqap's tribal-rooted brand) can't be excluded. Foreign aid policy is another fundamental component of the Uae's commitment in Yemen, as its second main donor after Saudi Arabia. Many reconstruction projects have already been launched in the south, focusing on Aden (as food aid, electricity and medical supplies). For instance, mass demonstrations recently broke up in Aden to denounce electricity shortages in the middle of the summer. The Emirates Red Crescent (ERC) organized in 2015 the campaign "Yemen We Care" to collect funds for Yemen's reconstruction, which rallied widespread mobilization among Emiratis. During 2016, the Uae organized also humanitarian assistance for the archipelago of Socotra stormed by two cyclones.

The Muslim Brotherhood issue - Analyzing the complexity and novelty of Abu Dhabi's military intervention in Yemen could pave the way for political and security perilous implications in the long-term. First, some tactical differences with Saudi Arabia have emerged. The Uae supported the removed Prime minister and Vice president Khaled Bahah, therefore they did not welcome the appointment of General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar (linked to the Muslim Brotherhood) as new vice president and deputy armed forces commander. However, the relationship with the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood remains the critical node. Saudis have lastly accepted to support Islah's militias (the party which rallies the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis) and the powerful al-Ahmar tribe to gain new leverage on the ground, while Emiratis preferred to sustain the Southern Resistance (which encompasses al-Hiraak secessionist movement plus some local tribes) to counterbalance the Ikhwan. This rift is clear in the contested

city of Taiz, still sieged by Shia insurgents where the Uae don't back dominant Muslim Brotherhood's local militias, contributing to a painful military stalemate. With regard to local populations, the Uae have to face different aspirations vis-à-vis southerners. After Shia's withdrawal, Yemenis of the southern regions disagree on how future Yemen should look like. Most of them reject the "two southern macro-region" draft of federal reform, prioritizing competing agendas based on conflicting regional and tribal interests (for instance Adenis, Hadhramis and Mahris don't share the same idea about the practical translation of the federal principle). In this framework, Emiratis must seek for local partners in order to stabilize southern Yemen but this connection might risk to provoke discontents and further fragmentation.

Militaries and national identity - From a domestic perspective, Abu Dhabi should also deal with a public opinion that has been experiencing military casualties abroad - at least eighty Emirati soldiers have died in Yemen so far and only on September 4, 2015, forty-five Uae's militaries were killed by a Huthi attack near Mareb. This is a new and challenging reality for a federation that has only recently introduced conscription. Therefore, after these dramatic events, the little number of draft soldiers deployed in Yemen was withdrawn. Militaries engaged abroad proved to be effective identity-mobilizers for a country which is trying to construct a

collective identity. Looking at national security, it seems evident that direct ground operations against Aqap's safe havens place the Uae at the forefront in the Arab battle against jihadi movements. This firm commitment could unprecedentedly expose Abu Dhabi and the federal emirates to the risk of attacks at home, in spite of strengthened security measures. The recent terrorist attack in Medina confirms that IS-affiliated cells have become sources of concern for GCC's homeland security too.

Ambitious engagement - Unlike the other Gulf monarchies, Uae's foreign policy is driven by the military tool, boosting regional assertiveness. Such a military-centred strategy aims to upgrade Uae's role in the Middle East and to satisfy their rank aspirations, therefore attempting to recalibrate power relations within the Gcc. Beyond international prestige, it is not clear whether Abu Dhabi have a political strategy to solve the Yemeni crisis, as well as to politically maximize its remarkable military efforts. Moreover, it remains to be seen if the list of Uae's priorities in Yemen (first of all the dismantlement of jihadi safe havens as Mukalla) can still overlap with the Saudi's one that has put the fight against Shia militias and the security of the northern border at the top). It is already clear, though, that United Arab Emirates' complex military intervention in Yemen has opened a new Emirati geopolitical season marked by ambitious engagement in the Middle East and beyond.