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The War in Yemen and Future Relations
between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi

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Southern separatist forces, which claim independence for South Yemen and enjoy the support of the UAE, have consolidated their hold on Aden, the alternative capital of the Yemeni central government since it lost Sanaa. This development, which follows the UAE's announcement that it intends to reduce its forces in Yemen, is yet another sign that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are divided over the nature and possible reformation of the Yemeni state. While Saudi Arabia is determined to return Yemen to its pre-war unified governmental structure and reinstate the government that was expelled from Sanaa in March 2015, the UAE's strategic and economic interests are served by securing the southern region's aspirations for an independent state. The UAE's military withdrawal will make it more difficult for the Saudis to fight against the Houthis, as the bulk of the ground fighting was conducted by the UAE, mercenaries from Somalia and Colombia, and local forces. The United States and Israel should be concerned about the outcome of the conflict in Yemen, particularly if the UAE's withdrawal emboldens the Houthis. The result could be a situation in which the Houthis, with their expanding cooperation with Iran, control north Yemen and continue to hit strategic targets in Saudi Arabia and threaten traffic in the Red Sea. Continued attacks on Saudi Arabia, the interruption of global commerce, and growing friction in the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis will disrupt efforts of Israel and the United States, as they seek to build a more powerful and unified front to counter the malign activities of Iran and its proxies.

In early August 2019, southern separatist forces, which claim independence for South Yemen and enjoy the support of the UAE, took control of the presidential palace and military facilities in the city of Aden – thereby consolidating their hold on the strategic southern port city that has been the alternative capital of the Yemeni central government since it lost Sanaa. This development followed the UAE's announcement that it intends to reduce its forces in Yemen, as tensions in the Gulf continue to increase between Iran and the United States. Although Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are trying to broadcast "business as usual" in their relations and even announced the formation of a bilateral commission to manage the "ceasefire" in Yemen, the reality is that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are divided over the nature and possible reformation of the Yemeni state. This divergence could place the two leaders of the Arab coalition in Yemen on opposing sides of the

conflict and test the relationship between them. While Saudi Arabia is determined to return Yemen to its pre-war unified governmental structure and reinstate the government that was expelled from Sanaa in March 2015, the UAE's strategic and economic interests are served by securing and encouraging the southern region's aspirations for an independent state.

Following the Houthi rebels' conquest of extensive regions of Yemen from late 2014 through early 2015, including the capital, Sanaa, the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi fled to Aden. Over the course of the war, Hadi and some of his officials left Aden for Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. From Aden and Riyadh the government-in-exile led a campaign, backed by Saudi Arabia and the regional coalition it established in March 2015, against the Houthi rebels. From the start, the presence of the exiled central government in Aden sparked friction between the government and the Southern Movement, despite the fact they were both part of the larger coalition fighting against the Houthi rebels. As the war intensified, there was growing criticism in the south over the presence of the "visitors" from Sanaa – concerning governance of the south and the failure of the military campaign against the Houthis. Senior officials in the Southern Movement demanded increased representation in the central government in light of their contribution to the war effort and given the historic stature of the south as a state prior to the unification of Yemen in May 1990. Backed by the UAE, the southern separatists eventually established the Southern Transitional Council, which became the leading force for independence for the south. Alongside the Council stood fighters from the Security Belt, which the UAE established as a military force to defend the border of the southern provinces against Houthi attacks. Security Belt forces identify with the Transitional Council and are active on its behalf in the provinces of Aden, Abyan, Dhale, and Shabwah. Their show of force when taking over key facilities in Aden in early August this year highlighted the military and political power of the Southern Transitional Council. It now appears that Yemen's civil war that has been plaguing the country for five years could incur yet another layer of conflict.

The Transitional Council and its members captured the presidential palace in Aden on August 10 and called for the establishment of an independent state in the south. Their leader, Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, emphasized that efforts to reunify Yemen would simply restore the status that brought about the current civil war, and therefore the south must regain independence. In Zoubaidi's view, the partition of north and south in Yemen reflects the social, cultural, political, and historical reality, and it is more natural than a united Yemen. He has already called on international bodies as well as Hadi's government and the Saudis to comply with the reestablishment of the southern state. The confrontations between the Saudi-backed Hadi government and the Transitional Council have largely been military in nature and appear to be spreading in the south, for example

in Abyan and Shabwah provinces, despite statements on withdrawing its forces from Aden and the coalition's calls to initiate negotiations.

An independent southern state serves neither Saudi interests nor those of the Hadi government, particularly when most of the former northern territories remain under Houthi control; Saudi Arabia views the Houthis as an Iranian extension in Yemen, and is therefore unable to accept their ruling any part of Yemen. In reality, however, a version of north and south states are forming. For its part, the UAE has an interest in the establishment of a southern state as a means to increase UAE influence over the coastal areas of Yemen in order to mitigate economic competition to its ports in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, as well as expand its activities in nearby African states. In addition, the establishment of a state in South Yemen might enable smaller Gulf states to form ties and develop policies outside of the context of the Iran-Saudi conflict. Yet while the Southern Movement and its supporters strive for an independent southern state, the Transitional Council faces challenges from within the south. For example, objection to its *modus operandi* in the Shabwah district led fighters who in principle support southern independence to join Hadi's forces.

Disagreements between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and the forces they support in Yemen reflect the countries' diverging interests. Saudi Arabia is primarily concerned with the threat posed by the Houthis based in northern Yemen, because they are both geographically near to Saudi Arabia and extremely hostile to the Kingdom, as is evident from the ongoing Houthi attacks on both civilian and military strategic targets in Saudi territory. To mitigate that threat Riyadh was willing to cooperate with various forces, including the Islamist Yemeni al-Islah party, which Saudi Arabia had previously called a terrorist organization. The UAE, in contrast, sees Islamist forces as the primary threat to its national stability and security, threatening its freedom of navigation in the Arabian Sea and around the Bab el-Mandeb strait.

At this point, a number of questions remain. It will be important to see how recent developments in the campaign in Yemen impact on relations between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed; their political and military cooperation in Yemen was considered a testament to the powerful ties between the two countries. Will the announcement of the UAE's withdrawal of military forces from Yemen signify (or cause) relations between the two countries to decline, or are its effects confined to the Yemeni theater? It is certainly possible that the drawdown from Yemen signifies the UAE's desire to distance itself from the Saudi-led Yemen campaign, due both to the intensive criticism it earned in the US Congress and the drive to cut its losses in the prolonged conflict in order to focus attention and resources on another threat – Iran, or perhaps even to appease the latter.

In addition, the UAE's military withdrawal will make it more difficult for the Saudis to fight against the Houthis, as the bulk of the ground fighting was conducted by the UAE, mercenaries from Somalia and Colombia, and local forces. In an already difficult campaign, the loss of its more competent partner will complicate the situation for Saudi Arabia and may force it to seek a negotiated compromise with the Houthis. This weakened position is problematic for the Kingdom as it seeks to de-escalate following the expansion of Houthi attacks on targets in Saudi Arabia as well as their growing ties with Iran (including the recent appointment of an ambassador to Iran). The Houthis are likely encouraged by the de facto disintegration of the coalition against them as well as from the damage caused to Saudi Arabia's image as a result of its military campaign – the image of a paper tiger and a major contributing factor to the humanitarian disaster in Yemen. In order to come to terms with a new reality, it is possible that Riyadh will now opt to follow a more restrained approach than that which characterized its operations from the start of the war – while at the same time upgrading its active missile defense systems, passive defense, and intelligence capabilities to cope better with the threat of Houthi surface-to-surface missiles. In light of recent developments, it appears that the Saudis have lost leverage vis-à-vis the Houthis and their supporters. Leverage is now in the hands of Washington, which seeks to bring the sides back to the negotiating table once more, this time under the auspices of Oman.

The United States and Israel should be concerned about the outcome of the conflict in Yemen, particularly if the UAE's withdrawal emboldens the Houthis. The result could be a situation in which the Houthis, with their expanding cooperation with Iran, control north Yemen and continue to hit strategic targets in Saudi Arabia and threaten traffic in the Red Sea. Continued attacks on Saudi Arabia, the interruption of global commerce, and growing friction in the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis will disrupt efforts of Israel and the United States as they seek to build a more powerful and unified front to counter the malign activities of Iran and its proxies.