

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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LIBYA: UNEASE IN TRIPOLI DESPITE UAE TALKS

Alexander Sehmer

Libya's Khalifa Haftar had his forces stage a military parade on May 16 to mark the third year of his Libyan National Army (LNA) campaign to force Islamist militants out of Benghazi ([Libya Herald](#), May 16). With growing international backing, and large parts of Libya under his control, the LNA chief can afford a certain amount of peacocking, but the way forward for both him and Libya remains unclear.

Face-to-face talks in Abu Dhabi this month between Haftar and Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, who leads the country's UN-backed government, were heralded as something of a breakthrough ([The National](#), May 8). Certainly they were an improvement on earlier discussions in Cairo, where Egyptian diplomats struggled to keep things on track and the two men tried hard to avoid each other ([Mada](#), February 25).

However, the UAE talks have not been universally welcomed back home, where some generally pro-government militias are unwilling to see any rapprochement with Haftar. At issue is the suggestion the UAE talks

could pave the way for elections next year, with Haftar potentially standing as a rival to Sarraj. That suggestion is not one that has been endorsed by Sarraj — and given the security situation in Libya, it seems doubtful the country would be in a position to hold an election — but it is one that is being peddled by Haftar's supporters ([al-Jazeera](#), May 3).

Within Libya's political patchwork, the Presidential Council, headed by Sarraj, counts on support from an alliance of Tripoli-based fighters and militia from Misrata. If those elements now feel too many concessions are being made to Haftar, that support base could fragment, with some pulled toward the nationalist "salvation government" of Khalifa al-Ghweil, who was ousted from his base in Tripoli's Rixos hotel in March and remains strongly opposed to Haftar ([Libya Herald](#), March 15; [Libya Observer](#), November 28, 2016).

While certain political elements in the West are intent on pushing the line that Haftar is the only actor demonstrating tangible gains on the ground in Libya, the LNA leader's position is far from clear-cut. In Benghazi, his forces are still fighting to capture the remaining Islamist holdouts of Sabri and Souq al-Hout, while the threatening rhetoric he employed at his military parade is unlike-

ly to endear him to his rivals in Tripoli ([Libya Observer](#), May 17). Meanwhile, a campaign to hold Haftar to account for alleged atrocities carried out against civilians by his forces in Ganfouda is gaining some traction. The International Criminal Court prosecutor Fatou Bensouda indicated the matter was on her radar in her report to the UN Security Council earlier this month.

Even if Western political sympathies do run in his favor, Haftar remains a divisive figure. He may need to make some concessions of his own if he is to take a greater role in Libya's future.

KENYA: MILITANTS EXPLOIT TRAFFICKING NETWORK

Alexander Sehmer

Three Kenyans and a Somali refugee were arrested by South Sudanese security forces this month trying to make their way to Libya to join Islamic State (IS), according to Kenyan media ([The Standard](#), May 9). The arrests provide further evidence of a recruitment corridor that utilizes human trafficking networks through East Africa, and comes at a time when Kenya authorities are prosecuting one of the country's most wanted alleged terrorist facilitators.

The four arrested in South Sudan were apparently being trafficked by a cartel led by a man named Dahir Mohamed Dahir, currently being hunted by Kenyan police ([KBC1](#), May 9). His is one of a number of cartels that supposedly operate along what Kenyan reports refer to as the "Magafe network."

The network has come into particular focus in recent weeks following the arrest of Ali Hussein Ali, nicknamed "the trusted one," whom Kenyan authorities accuse of playing a key role in terrorist financing and facilitating the travel of IS recruits from Kenya and Somalia to Libya, as well as of overseeing human trafficking operations to Europe ([Kenyan National Police](#), March 30). [1]

Ali was arrested along with two others in the Kenyan coastal town of Malindi on March 27 ([The Standard](#), March 30). He now faces a trial on human trafficking offenses ([Nairobi Times](#), May 3). Supporters in Somalia say Ali is simply a businessman and trader.

According to the Kenyan police, however, Ali facilitated the travel of recruits by land from safe houses in Nairobi's Eastleigh district, Malindi and elsewhere, before traveling to the Ugandan capital of Kampala via the Busia border crossing, on to Juba in South Sudan, Khartoum and then to Libya. In fact, investigators say the Magafe network maintains at least ten routes to Libya and Syria, including one that involves flying via the United Arab Emirates ([Daily Nation](#), April 6).

Kenya's efforts to tackle trafficking have been somewhat inconsistent, but in recent years the government has introduced legislation aimed at making prosecutions

easier, and the recent arrests suggests a crackdown of sorts is under way.

In April, four people were arrested in operations at the Dadaab refugee camp in Garissa, accused of trafficking and facilitating recruits to join IS and al-Shabaab ([Daily Nation](#), April 6). Kenyan authorities say migrant smuggling cartels operate in the Ifo, Hagadera and Dagahaley areas of the camp, and have several times threatened to close the whole complex down, a move quashed by the courts.

The vast majority of people using the Magafe routes are seeking better economic circumstances for themselves and their families. Many hope to reach Europe. Far fewer are set on joining militant groups. The network, however, provides cover for the movement of terrorist recruits, and it is in both Kenya's and the West's interests that it be disrupted.

The Taliban's Spring Offensive: Afghanistan Faces a Crucial Year

Abubakar Siddique

With its spring offensive this year, the Afghan Taliban is seeking to add momentum to its insurgent campaign to topple the country's Western-backed government. For its part, Kabul hopes a peace deal with the notorious Islamist warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the renewed resolve of Washington and its NATO allies, will see it remain resilient.

But while the Afghan government enjoys international legitimacy and support, it faces a robust insurgency and the increasing involvement of great power interests suggests the situation will remain troubled.

Taliban Strategy

The Taliban strategy combines efforts to overrun the countryside with a relentless terrorism campaign in the cities. The aim is to topple the current Afghan government, which has pledged to create a moderate, inclusive and democratic state, and replace it with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate (the formal name of the movement).

On April 28, the Taliban announced the beginning of its annual spring campaign in this regard, repeating its vow to continue targeting U.S.-led NATO forces and Afghan security forces. The most intriguing part of the declaration, however, was its attempt to project the image of an alternative Taliban government.

"Mansouri operations will differ from previous ones in nature and will be conducted with a twin-tracked political and military approach," a Taliban statement said, using the formal name of the Taliban offensive.

It said that in regions captured by the Taliban, "particular attention will be paid to establishing a mechanism for social justice and development so that our people can live a secure and prosperous life," and added that "state-building will earnestly proceed and institutions will be erected to secure the social, security, and legal rights of the citizens" ([Taliban statement](#), April 28).

A week before the announcement, on April 21, around 10 Taliban attackers massacred more than 130 Afghan soldiers inside Camp Shaheen, the base of Afghan National Army's 209th Corps headquarters, in the northern city of Mazar-e Sharif.

A Taliban statement called the attack "a reminder to regime soldiers that they should not needlessly sacrifice their lives for the foreign occupiers and either join the ranks of the Mujahedeen or else desert ranks and go back to their homes."

The statement reiterated the longstanding Taliban stance that the Afghan government is a U.S. puppet. "The soldiers are trained by the Americans, equipped with their weapons and their wages paid by the Pentagon. How can they claim they fight for their homeland and not for their foreign cashiers?" ([Taliban statement](#), April 23).

Areas of Taliban Control

The insurgents appear to be in no mood for peace talks. Instead, they want to accelerate their push to overthrow the government. An editorial on the pro-Taliban *Nun Asia* website recently taunted Kabul for its inability to protect government forces: "During this sensitive war environment, the government's security institutions are so weak that their enemies are able to mount war games within their lines. Now, how many chances of survival does this regime have?" ([Nun Asia](#), April 25).

On the Taliban's official website, an article entitled "The Anarchy Surrounding the Two-Headed Kabul Regime" claimed that the national unity government is moving rapidly toward disintegration. "The line of authority is devolving and blurring with each passing day," said article, published on April 24.

"Cabinet members openly contradict and oppose government policies and directives. Each group blames the other for the ongoing chaos. Each party is developing parallel links with foreign powers to strengthen their hold on power" ([Taliban article](#), April 24).

The Taliban is clearly confident and eager to build on territorial gains achieved since more than 100,000 Western-led troops began departing Afghanistan at the end of 2014 and NATO declared the end of major combat operations. In a March report entitled "Percent of

Country Under the Control of the Mujahedin of the Islamic Emirate," the Taliban listed regions under their control in more than 400 districts across Afghanistan's 34 provinces ([Taliban report](#), March 26). That claim to dominate 45 districts across the country is significantly more than the nine districts that U.S. forces acknowledge the Taliban controls.

The Taliban also briefly signaled apparent interest in peace talks. "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is interested in finding a lasting solution to the problems in Afghanistan," a March 7 statement said. However, it also reiterated that the Taliban continue to seek nothing less than complete victory.

"Defending our nation and our followers is our legitimate right, and we are ready to defend it on the negotiations table and in the trenches," the statement said. "Fighting is not our choice, but it has been imposed on us" ([Taliban Statement](#), March 7).

Nearly 16 years after their rule was ousted by the U.S.-led intervention in late 2001, the Taliban continue to regard themselves as Afghanistan's legitimate government.

Government Resilience

Kabul has sought to counter the Taliban with a mixture of military muscle, counterterrorism operations, international aid and a public commitment to reconciliation.

In late March, the government unveiled a four-year plan to reform and strengthen its security forces, which now number nearly 350,000 ([Tolo News](#), March 31). The plan includes doubling the number of special forces, currently at 17,000, as well as plans to strengthen the fledgling air force and intelligence services. It is also committed to improving the overall discipline of forces, which continue to struggle with corruption and desertions. In one positive sign, Afghan special forces, despite being stretched across a vast battlefield, have shown that they are capable of delivering debilitating blows to the insurgents.

Kabul has also hardened its rhetoric toward the Taliban. "Taliban leaders enjoy a life of luxury," President Ashraf Ghani told Afghan forces in February. "Each one takes several wives, and their children enjoy opulence. Yet

some of them employ the name of our sacred religion to foment violence and savagery” ([Tolo News](#), February 27).

A few days later, Ghani characterized the insurgents as aiding and fomenting terrorism, saying the Taliban were responsible for “20 disparate terrorist groups” operating in Afghanistan. Many of these date back to the Taliban’s stint in power in the 1990s. As well as hosting al-Qaeda, the Taliban invited Central Asian extremists affiliated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and supported an array of Pakistani militants fighting in the Indian administered Himalayan region of Kashmir. The group has kept up these alliances and contacts in the intervening years, and some of these same groups are once again active in Afghanistan, albeit under new leaders and new identities.

“While they are different organizations, their crimes and the harm they cause to our people are the same. The Taliban have paved the way for all these groups to operate,” Ghani told the Afghan parliament ([RFE/RL Gandhara](#), March 09).

Kabul is hoping the entry of a major Islamist warlord into the government fold will substantially weaken Taliban claims to be fighting for Afghanistan’s liberation from foreign occupation. Hekmatyar, leader of Hizbe-Islami Afghanistan (HIA), one of Afghanistan’s oldest jihadist factions and largest Islamist parties, denounced the insurgency as “unholy” when he returned to the government side after two decades of opposing it. In a direct challenge to the Taliban, he said: “We invite you to join our caravan of peace. Abandon your meaningless, vulgar and unholy war” ([Khaama Press](#), April 29).

The Taliban have avoided directly commenting on Hekmatyar’s comments, but a pro-Taliban website accused him of “talking dangerously” and employing “taunts and insults” ([Nun Asia](#), May 3).

International Involvement

Kabul is also counting on a new Afghan strategy from U.S. President Donald Trump.

General John Nicholson, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, recently called for the deployment of more troops. Hundreds of U.S. soldiers, including Marines, have joined 13,000 NATO troops (which already include

8,400 Americans) still in the country and there are signs Washington will commit as much as \$20 billion annually to the Afghan war.

During a visit to Kabul on April 24, U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis appeared to pledge continued support for Afghan security forces, describing 2017 as “another tough year for the valiant Afghan security forces and the international troops who have stood and will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Afghanistan”.

Western officials worry that covert Russian aid and Moscow’s treatment of the Taliban as a legitimate party in the conflict is complicating efforts to resolve the situation in Afghanistan.

In April, General Nicholson complained of the “overt legitimacy lent to the Taliban by the Russians” since 2016, and warned there were continued reports of Russian assistance to the group and hinted this has helped it perpetrate attacks such as the devastating raid on a military compound in Mazar-e-Sharif, in which 140 Afghan soldiers forces were killed ([RFE/RL Gandhara](#), April 28). The attack, which came just days before the Taliban announced its spring offensive, was one of the deadliest the country has seen on a military base.

The criticism of Russian maneuvering suggests increasing unease in Washington over Taliban contacts and cooperation with Russia and Iran.

In recent years, the insurgents have cultivated relations with the two countries, including supplying weapons and military training. Pakistan, the Taliban’s principal foreign backer, appears supportive of these ties and has joined Russia and China in an apparent diplomatic push to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table without involving the United States.

While Kabul been critical of Moscow’s involvement — in particular the Russian endorsement of the Taliban’s call for a full withdrawal of foreign troops from the country — it is keen to avoid a diplomatic showdown ([Khaama Press](#), April 2).

As its spring offensive evolves, the Taliban is likely to attempt to capture and retain a major population center, likely a provincial capital. Lashkar Gah, the capital of southern Helmand Province, or Kunduz, in the country’s

north, appear to be prime targets for a Taliban takeover. Key to achieving such a goal would be the acquisition of new weapons, such as an advanced anti-aircraft system, but there are no indications so far that any of its old or new backers are ready to commit such major resources to the group.

In a U.S. Senate hearing in February, General Nicholson described the security situation in Afghanistan as a stalemate. It remains to be seen whether that deadlock can be broken this year.

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The Dangerous Implications of Raising the Kurdish Flag in Kirkuk

Göktuğ Sönmez

In recent weeks, the already complicated politics around the Iraqi city of Kirkuk have been further inflamed by the decision of Kirkuk Governor Najmaddin Karim to raise the flag of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) over government buildings in the city ([Rudaw](#), March 28).

The decision came as somewhat of a surprise for international, regional and local audiences who have been focusing their attention on the offensive to recapture Mosul, the upcoming Raqqa operation in Syria and the end of Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield. The incident is expected to have implications not only for the future of Kirkuk, but also — as the city is a microcosm of Iraq's ethnic and religious composition — for the country as a whole.

It could also have serious regional implications for the fight against Islamic State (IS) as several regional players in that conflict have been closely engaged with Kirkuk, either directly or indirectly.

Kirkuk Under PUK Control

In the aftermath of the IS offensive on northern Iraq, the city of Kirkuk has fallen increasingly under the influence of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Since the summer of 2014, when Iraqi troops fled the city in the face of the IS advance, security in Kirkuk has been guaranteed by Kurdish peshmerga forces, along with the PUK-controlled *asayish* (a regional police force) ([Ekurd Daily](#), June 12, 2014).

Turkmens and Arabs have expressed their irritation with this situation, but the peshmerga's efforts to save the city from an IS invasion, and the city's political landscape — Kurdish MPs constitute a majority of the Kirkuk Provincial Council — put the Kurds in a strong position ([DW Türkçe](#), April 5).

Karim himself has been unwavering. His tough stance is linked to the importance Kurdish political and armed

groups across the board give to the city. Described as the “Jerusalem” of the Kurds by PUK leader Jalal Talabani, it falls within the boundaries of the Hamrin Mountains, an area many view as the historical boundary of a Kurdish region ([Rudaw](#), April 2; [Hurriyet Daily News](#), December 31, 2004).

Kurdish political parties have long called for a referendum in Kirkuk, and the government was due to hold one in December 2007, in accordance with Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. However, the planned preceding steps — the settlement of land disputes following an influx of Kurds to the city and a census of the city’s population — never came about. Since 2003, there has been considerable Kurdish migration to the city, which the Iraqi government says has significantly changed Kirkuk’s demographics.

Arabs and Turkmen argue, given the current situation, that Article 140 is no longer in effect. Kurdish parties, however, point out it remains in the constitution and say it remains valid, even though the deadline has passed.

In March, in protest at Baghdad’s neglect of Kirkuk, the PUK advanced on the oil wells near the city. Kirkuk’s hydrocarbon resources have long been a point of tension, not only between Erbil and Baghdad, but also between the Kurds themselves — specifically the KDP under KRG president Masoud Barzani, and the PUK ([ARA News](#), March 3). The move by Kirkuk governor Karim needs to be viewed in the light of these divisions.

Raising the Flag

Karim’s decision was in defiance of the Iraqi government, but with the army busy with its offensive on Mosul, he could be confident the military would be unable to respond. Karim can thus strengthen his own position, as well as that of the PUK, at a time when the PUK, KDP and the Gorran Movement founded by the late Nawshirwan Mustafa are engaged in a clash over Barzani’s continuing presidential term, regarded as illegal by the PUK and Gorran ([al-Monitor](#), May 22, 2015).

The move — both defying the central government and further underlining KRG’s ambitions regarding the city — is a boost for both Karim and the PUK, not only in Kirkuk but in the KRG as a whole. It is also a position that Iraq’s Kurdish political parties can get behind, offering some sense of political cohesion.

Karim’s decision, however, has caused an outcry from several local and regional actors. The central government condemned it, calling it a violation of the constitution and insisting that only the Iraqi flag could be raised over buildings under the authority of the central government ([al-Jazeera](#), April 2). However, Karim says Baghdad’s objection has no legal basis and that he is under no obligation to obey it ([Hurriyet Daily News](#), April 3).

The mainly Iran-backed Shia militia umbrella organization Hashd Shaabi is also against an expansionist Kurdish policy. The militia’s presence around Kirkuk and its earlier encounters with peshmerga, resulting in clashes in Tuzkhurmato, suggest a key challenge might come from the Hashd Shaabi ([K24](#), November 15, 2015; [Rudaw](#), April 26, 2016).

Turkey too has been critical, viewing itself historically as the protector of the Iraqi’s minority Turkmen population. İbrahim Kalın, spokesperson for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, warned the move would cause further tensions in Kirkuk, while Hüseyin Müftüoğlu, spokesperson for the Turkish foreign ministry, said the move would damage stability and reconciliation efforts and could erode the multi-cultural identity of the city ([al-Jazeera Turk](#), March 31; [TRT Haber](#), March 19). President Erdoğan himself warned that unless the flag is taken down, the Kurdish administration of the city risked damaging the “good ties” between Ankara and Erbil ([Rudaw](#), April 5).

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), meanwhile, described the decision as a “unilateral step that might jeopardize harmony and peaceful coexistence among many ethnic and religious groups that rightly call Kirkuk their home” ([Rudaw](#), March 21).

A Distraction in the Fight Against IS

The move may also have significant implications for the fight against IS. A crisis in Kirkuk could divert the Iraqi army’s attention at a time when it is engaged in the Mosul offensive, especially if the central government decides harsher measures are required against what it sees as a violation of the sovereignty of the state.

The already problematic relationship between Erbil and Baghdad has further deteriorated, while the risk of a

military response by the Hashd is no less dangerous since it could trigger both broader sectarian fighting and an ethnic clash between Turkmen and Kurds due to the presence of Shia Turkmen in the militias.

Since the Hashd's position is closely linked with that of Iran, PUK-Iran relations could also suffer. The statement of the Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson Behram Kasimi that the decision is illegal and a violation of the Iraqi constitution is telling ([Anadolu Agency](#), April 3).

Turkey's irritation at the matter may hinder any possible anti-IS cooperation with the KRG, as well as threaten the KRG's economic future since Turkey is its largest trading partner. The KRG is already beset with economic difficulties. The move could also pose a risk for Barzani, and inflame internal political struggles that, in the past, have spilled over into violence between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK, and between KDP and Gorran ([Rudaw](#), April 5).

Therefore, at a time of financial and political difficulty for the KRG, and against the backdrop of the fight against IS, the move may act as a further destabilizing factor, especially considering the multi-ethnic dynamics in Kirkuk.

The decision to raise the KRG flag threatens not only to inflame tensions locally, but also nationally, and could endanger the post-IS reconstruction and reconciliation efforts that will be necessary in Iraq in the coming years.

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The Battle for Yemen: A Quagmire for Saudi Arabia and the UAE

Michael Horton

The Saudi- and Emirati-led war in Yemen has been ongoing for 26 months. The war, which began on March 26, 2015 and was ambitiously named "Operation Decisive Storm," has achieved none of its stated intentions ([al-Arabiya](#), March 26, 2015). The primary aim was the reinstallation of Yemen's deeply unpopular president, Abd Raboo Mansur Hadi. However, Hadi, who many Yemenis view as a traitor, remains in exile in Saudi Arabia along with most of his government.

Its other goal was to defeat Yemen's Houthis, a Zaidi Shia organization that is now allied with many of the most capable units of what was the Yemeni Army. While the Houthis and their allies were pushed out of the port city of Aden and, most recently, the small Red Sea port of al-Mocha, the Houthis have retained control of the capital of Sanaa and most of northwest Yemen ([Gulf News](#), February 10). For months, the frontlines in what is a complex multi-actor civil war have remained fixed. This is despite the fact that both Saudi Arabia and the Emirates have spent billions of dollars on unrelenting and devastating — at least for Yemen's civilians — airstrikes, and backed a disparate mix of anti-Houthi forces and ground forces made up primarily of mercenaries.

Rather than the short decisive intervention envisioned by Saudi Arabia's princes and generals, the war is a quagmire with no military solution. Yemen's physical and political terrains are unkind to outsiders. Even a cursory reading of Yemen's history shows that both have proven fatal for invaders. Yet rather than reevaluating their intervention in this complex civil war, both Saudi Arabia and the Emirates seem poised not only to continue but also to enhance their involvement with further weapons shipments to dubious forces. It also seems likely that they will launch a possible offensive on the port of Hodeidah, at present controlled by both Houthi forces and their allies.

Neither of these tactics is likely to succeed in defeating the Houthis. Instead, both the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia risk being drawn ever deeper

into a war they cannot win. What is certain is that their ongoing involvement in Yemen's civil war will prolong the conflict and drain their treasuries of billions more dollars. Ultimately the two countries' deepening involvement in Yemen's civil war may pose more of threat to their own governments and ties within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) than to the Houthis. There are already signs that the Emirates and Saudi Arabia are at loggerheads over how to proceed with the war and over which areas of Yemen the two countries plan to control.

War Within a War

In February 2017, Aden's international airport was the scene of a short but viscous battle between two rival factions: the Saudi-backed "Presidential Guards," led by Abd Raboo Mansur al-Hadi's son, and Emirate-backed factions that already controlled the facility ([New Arab](#), February 13). The Emirati-backed forces refused to relinquish control of the airport and fighting ensued. A Saudi operated Apache helicopter fired missiles at several armored personnel carriers. The fighting temporarily ceased when Hadi purportedly ordered his men to stand down, but broke out again in March when Sudanese forces, paid for by Saudi Arabia, attempted to wrest control of the airport once more ([Middle East Monitor](#), March 7). The Sudanese forces were obliged to back down.

The fight over Aden's airport is being played out against a much larger and far more complex fight for Aden and southern Yemen. The fighting between rival factions backed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE clearly shows that Yemen's already complicated civil war is being made more so by what is essentially a war within a war: the fight between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and their proxies. While the initial decision to intervene in Yemen was largely made by Saudi Arabia's Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the deputy crown prince and son of the current king, Saudi Arabia has largely limited its involvement in Yemen to an aerial campaign. The Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) and the relatively more capable Saudi National Guard have been largely absent from the war. In contrast, the UAE's much smaller but moderately more capable army has led the efforts on the ground in Yemen. The UAE has deployed its forces, many of which are mercenaries (the UAE presidential guard is commanded by a retired Major General from Australia), to the central Yemeni governorate of Marib and has smaller

contingents of soldiers in al-Mukalla and the Hadramawt ([Middle East Eye](#), December 23, 2015).

The UAE has focused on establishing and training proxy forces that will eventually, it is hoped, take on the Houthis and their allies. In Marib, the UAE has tried but largely failed to build up a small army of tribal fighters capable of launching an offensive on Houthi-held Sanaa. However, Marib's tribes are notorious for being fickle allies and experts at extracting resources.

The governorate of Marib is a natural staging point for an attack on Sanaa as it offers the least difficult and least mountainous route to the capital. The governorate is also home to important oil and gas handling facilities. In theory, the UAE's plan to use the governorate as a springboard to Sanaa was sound. However, the cultural and political terrain of Marib and the neighboring governorates of al-Jawf — part of which is a stronghold for Houthi allied forces — and al-Bayda — a stronghold for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) — are even more treacherous than the surrounding deserts and mountains.

For nearly two years, members of the UAE army and its mercenaries have been training and equipping proxy forces in preparation for an assault on Sanaa. As yet, there are few signs that these forces are ready or willing to launch such an attack. Instead, weapons and materiel are siphoned off by members of these proxy forces and informal militias collecting weapons and before returning to their villages. There are now so many small and medium arms available in Yemen that prices have steadily fallen for most of these weapons over the last year.

The lack of progress in the war and the incredible costs incurred by the Emirates has not gone unnoticed by the Emirati ruling elite, nor by Emirati citizens, even though criticism of the war can result in incarceration. Since the beginning of 2017, there has been a less than subtle shift in Emirati policy in Yemen. The UAE is becoming far more pragmatic in its approach to the war and has recognized that the Saudi-backed government in exile, led by Hadi, has no future in Yemen. The Emiratis have also seemingly recognized that while the militias and proxy forces they have armed and trained are willing to defend and fight for southern Yemen, they have little or no interest in taking on the Houthis and their allies ensconced in northwest Yemen.

The Emiratis are now focusing on building relationships with what they consider to be more reliable partners, many of which are members of southern Yemen's numerous secessionist groups, which are committed to the restoration of an independent south Yemen. By and large, they have no interest in participating in an offensive against the Houthis and their allies who remain in control of what was an independent north Yemen (formerly the Yemen Arab Republic). These secessionist groups also tend to be more moderate and more determined to battle militant Salafist organizations like AQAP.

The UAE has been far more discriminating about which groups it arms and trains than Saudi Arabia. The UAE, at least in part, recognizes that one of the primary beneficiaries of the war in Yemen has been AQAP. Saudi Arabia has at best turned a blind eye to AQAP since the group is the sworn enemy of the Houthis. AQAP has some of the best-trained and hardest fighters among its ranks and has inserted its operatives, both covertly and overtly, into many of the militias fighting the Houthis in contested areas like Taiz and al-Bayda.

AQAP's growing capabilities in Yemen have clearly alarmed some members of the Emirati government. As a result, the UAE is keen to back moderate forces that are willing and capable of checking AQAP's growing influence, even if this means de-prioritizing the fight against the Houthis. This shift in Emirati policy was brought to the fore by the fighting in Aden. The Emirati government has reportedly threatened to withdraw all of its forces from Yemen if Saudi Arabia continues to back Hadi ([Middle East Monitor](#), March 7).

Despite this threatened withdrawal, Saudi Arabia has shown no inclination to change course. In Aden, the war within the war seems to be intensifying as a former governor of Aden, Aidaroos al-Zubaidi, has announced that he has formed a governing council that will administer the south, with him acting as president ([Middle East Monitor](#), May 12). While the Emirates have not openly backed al-Zubaidi, it is likely that he is acting at least with their acquiescence, if not support.

The UAE's position in Yemen is far stronger than Saudi Arabia's. While the UAE army and its mercenaries may have failed to launch a successful offensive against the Houthis, these forces have built some meaningful rela-

tionships with Yemen's secessionists and tribes. These relationships will go a long way to secure what could be some influence in southern Yemen for the Emirates. Because Saudi Arabia has relied almost entirely on a brutal aerial campaign and on the widely unpopular Sudanese forces to implement its policy in Yemen, its influence will be limited. Furthermore, the unrelenting and indiscriminate bombing by Saudi aircraft has caused even those Yemenis opposed to the Houthis to question Saudi Arabia's intentions.

Political and Tactical Quagmire

Despite two years of failure that have wrecked Yemen, cost thousands of civilian lives and empowered al-Qaeda's most formidable franchise, Saudi Arabia shows no signs of rethinking its adventurism. In fact, the House of Saud, at the behest of Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, is requesting additional assistance from the United States for its long-planned invasion of Houthi controlled Hodeidah ([al-Monitor](#), April 24). The Saudi government likely recognizes that without considerable U.S. assistance — including U.S. troops on the ground — they and their proxies will fail to take the well-defended city of more than three hundred thousand.

Even with U.S. assistance, the invasion will be costly and ineffective. The terrain to the east of Hodeidah is comprised of some of the most forbidding mountainous terrain in the world. The mountains, caves, and deep canyons are ideal for guerrilla warfare that would wear down even the finest and best disciplined military. The most capable units of what was the Yemeni Army and the Houthis themselves will inflict heavy losses on those forces that try to take Hodeidah and then, if necessary, move up into the mountains.

The Saudi effort in Yemen hinges on the invasion of Hodeidah. The reasoning behind the invasion is that without Hodeidah and its port — where supplies trickle through — the Houthis and their allies, along with millions of civilians, can be starved into submission.

While there is little doubt that thousands more Yemeni civilians will face starvation, the invasion of Hodeidah will not end the war — far from it. The Houthis and their allies are resourceful and will fight on for months — if not years — to come. They will also intensify their retaliatory cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia, which the Saudi army is incapable of stopping. Rather than end

the war, the planned invasion will intensify it across all fronts.

Saudi Arabia's planned invasion of Hodeidah has received only tepid support from the UAE, which likely understands the futility and risks of such a plan. Rather than support the Saudi effort, the UAE is focused on consolidating its spheres of influence. The UAE and its proxies are particularly active in the governorate of the Hadramawt ([Daily Star](#), May 4).

Located in eastern Yemen, the Hadramawt is rich in gas and oil. The governorate has traditionally had close ties with Saudi Arabia as many of its notable families have extensive business interests there. Going back for at least a decade Saudi Arabia has had a keen interest in the possibility of constructing a pipeline across the Hadramawt that would allow it to bypass the Strait of Hormuz. Such a pipeline would be a strategic coup for the Kingdom because it would undermine Iran's ability to disrupt Saudi oil exports.

Interestingly, it is the UAE and not Saudi Arabia that has been working assiduously to build some kind of governing coalition of Hadrawmi elites in the governorate. The UAE led the effort to retake al-Mukalla, the governorate's port and capital, which was held by AQAP until April 2016 ([The National](#), May 11).

Notably during AQAP's year-long occupation of the city, al-Mukalla was not subject to Saudi airstrikes. While AQAP is still very much a presence across the Hadramawt, it has been pushed out of parts of the governorate thanks to well-armed tribal militias that are likely supported by the UAE. Given the importance of the Hadramawt, it is certain that control of the governorate, much like Aden, will be contested by Saudi Arabia and the UAE via their proxies if not their own forces.

Neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE will secure durable spheres of influence in Yemen. In Yemen, politics is a blood sport that outsiders rarely understand and never win. Even if Saudi Arabia and the UAE were able to present a united front in Yemen, it is unlikely that they would be able to defeat the Houthis and establish a government that would serve their interests. Given the fact that the two primary members of the coalition that launched "Operation Decisive Storm" are engaged in what can be described as a war within a war, it is certain

that neither country will be able to stabilize Yemen, if that is indeed their goal.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are stuck in a political and tactical quagmire. The conflict has exacerbated the divisions in Yemen's north and south and has unleashed AQAP and a host of smaller militant Salafist organizations. Tactically there are no good military options for bringing about a conclusion to the war, and political options that existed before the start of the intervention are no longer available.

The Houthis and their allies are formidable and determined. They enjoy the tacit support of millions of Yemenis and are fighting on their home ground. Even if Saudi Arabia were unwise enough to launch an all-out invasion of Yemen — and it is unlikely that its forces could manage the logistics much less the actual fighting — it would face heavy and ongoing losses. Egypt lost an estimated 25,000 soldiers when it intervened in Yemen's 1962-70 civil war. The Egyptian government wisely turned down a request by Saudi Arabia to send troops to Yemen this time.

The only way to end the war in Yemen and to begin stabilizing and rebuilding the country is through some kind of negotiated settlement. North Yemen's civil war ended only once all outside participants in the conflict had withdrawn. Then a negotiated settlement was agreed to by the warring parties. A similar process will likely prove the only way forward in the current conflict.

Outlook

Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia's leadership seems intent on continuing its intervention despite the lack of progress and the extraordinary suffering and damage caused by the war. In addition to continuing to pursue a failed strategy in Yemen, Saudi Arabia seems intent on battling its key partner in Yemen — the UAE. The fact that relations between the UAE and Saudi Arabia (at least in terms of Yemen) are deteriorating does not bode well for efforts to stabilize the country.

If Saudi Arabia and the UAE choose to fight one another via proxies, as has already happened in Aden, Yemen's civil war will take on another layer of deadly complexity. Neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE — and certainly not Yemen — will benefit from such a fight. Instead, AQAP

and other militant Salafist organizations will profit even more than they already have.

Given the failed strategies employed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Yemen, it is all but certain that the war in Yemen will continue for months if not years. The conflict has already devastated Yemen. However, the longer it continues, the more danger it poses not only to twenty-seven million Yemenis but also to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Even if the war were to stop today, the consequences of having devastated an entire country's infrastructure, further impoverished millions and of having dumped tens of millions of dollars of weapons into an already well-armed country will reverberate throughout the region for years to come.

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