

From Bromance to Frenemyship? Regional Implications of the Saudi-UAE Rivalry

by *Sebastian Sons*

In December 2025, tensions between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) escalated in southern Yemen, marking an unprecedented public confrontation between the two Gulf partners. Triggered by a military offensive by the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), which advocates southern Yemeni secession, Riyadh responded with strong diplomatic and military pressure. The Saudi Foreign Ministry publicly described Emirati support for the STC as "highly dangerous" and the Yemeni government demanded the withdrawal of UAE forces from Yemen within 24 hours. Militarily, Saudi forces attacked two vessels in the port city of al-Mukalla, allegedly carrying weapons from the Emirates to the STC. Under mounting pressure, the UAE agreed to the demands to withdraw its forces and relinquish control over strategic locations. Saudi-backed security forces have since established control in large parts of Yemen's South, a Yemeni government reshuffle process is ongoing after the ouster of STC-linked personalities and Saudi Arabia has announced to host a conference to support a political solution to the southern issue.

Why does it matter?

This confrontation represents a paradigm shift in Saudi-UAE relations. At its core lies a fundamental divergence over Yemen's political future. Saudi Arabia seeks a unified, centralized Yemeni state, while the UAE has supported decentralized or autonomous structures in the South through the STC. It is estimated that the UAE has trained up to 200,000 Yemeni fighters, highlighting the scale of its security footprint and indirect influence in the country. Since 2018, the UAE via the STC has gradually built up control over large parts of the coastline of southern Yemen, including Aden, consolidated its presence on the islands Socotra and Mayyun (also known as Perim), and expanded its maritime footprint. Southern Yemen holds high geostrategic relevance for the UAE as a maritime and trading power, providing access to the Red Sea, one of the world's most critical shipping routes. For Saudi Arabia, however, the STC's expansion crossed a strategic red line. Hadhramawt, rich in oil and gas and directly bordering Saudi territory, functions as a security buffer zone and is also socially tied to Saudi Arabia as close personal and commercial links between Saudi and Hadhrami communities and businesspeople exist. For several years, Saudi Arabia has also pursued plans to construct an oil pipeline from its Eastern Province through Yemen's al-Mahra to the coast. The project is intended to reduce the kingdom's reliance on the Strait of Hormuz which is a critical chokepoint in global oil trade and to curtail Iran's capacity to exert strategic leverage over Saudi energy exports. Riyadh also seeks access to key trade and transport corridors and is unwilling to accept a permanent Emirati monopoly over regional maritime logistics.

What is the big picture?

The Saudi-UAE rivalry reflects a geopolitical divergence and is affecting conflict theaters beyond Yemen, including the Horn of Africa across several dimensions:

The local dimension: Traditionally, Saudi Arabia acts as a status quo power, viewing non-state actors and secessionist movements as threats to national and regional stability. The UAE, by contrast, has instrumentalized actors such as the STC in Yemen or the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan to secure maritime chokepoints, trade routes, and strategic resources by leveraging state fragmentation as a tool. Such support is framed by UAE analysts as a necessity to deal with fragile states and promote stability.

The Israeli dimension: In the wake of Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack on Israel and the subsequent devastating conflict in Gaza, Saudi Arabia has reaffirmed its longstanding pro-Palestinian position, effectively suspending normalization discussions with Israel. In contrast, the UAE, as a signatory of the Abraham Accords, continues its partnership with Israel. The Emirati government argues that, through its diplomatic relations with Israel, it can facilitate the delivery of aid to Gaza. At the same time, the UAE has also benefited from intensified trade relations with Israeli companies. Developments such as Israeli recognition of Somaliland and the Emirati presence at the port of Berbera have further spurred Saudi concerns about being encircled by an Israeli-UAE axis of fragmentation. In this context, the STC's announcement that it would pursue normalization of relations with Israel in case Tel Aviv supports the STC's independence aspirations was perceived by Saudi Arabia as a strategic liability.

The regional dimension: Regionally, the UAE has pursued a strategy of global inter-connectivity and diversified partnerships since the early 2000s, investing heavily in

maritime infrastructure while backing regional proxies. Saudi Arabia, since 2021, has emphasized de-escalation and conflict management through a “not alone” diplomacy and aims to preserve regional leadership by aligning with other players such as Egypt, Pakistan or Turkey. In a polarized global environment, both states thus compete for liquid alliances with regional partners and major powers such as the United States and China, seeking to position themselves as indispensable actors in defense, technology, and economic cooperation, which reflects wider shifts amid growing multipolarity.

The geoeconomic dimension: Both countries follow similar economic diversification strategies. Competition over maritime hubs, AI, resources, investment, and nation branding has intensified in recent years. Saudi Arabia needs to promote job creation, revenue diversification, and social resilience amid lower oil prices. Such challenges have further sharpened perceptions of the UAE as a competitor rather than a partner.

What comes next?

On the regional level, deep mutual mistrust persists between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and polarizing narratives currently dominate the public and social media discourse in both countries. Saudi analysts accuse Abu Dhabi of entering “a state of political paranoia” while UAE voices frame the Emirates as a “problem-solving actor, pursuing a flexible, non-polarizing approach that focuses on managing complexity.” On Yemen, Riyadh has decided to take more political responsibility and faces the growing risk of renewed fragmentation. There, the situation has stabilized only at a superficial level. Even after the STC’s proclaimed dissolution by its delegation in Riyadh, the Southern issue remains unresolved, as divergent positions persist regarding the future political status of

southern Yemen. For instance, protests in Aden took place in January demanding Southern independence. Furthermore, an attack on a convoy of the Saudi-backed Giants Brigades killed five people and wounded three others. Furthermore, the Houthis will continue to constitute a security liability for Saudi Arabia as they perceive efforts to unify disparate armed forces under control of the internationally recognized government as a threat and seek to consolidate their influence and leverage. In this context, Saudi Arabia faces a delicate balancing act, as it must manage a dialogue that is considered legitimate among the diverse Southern actors.

Beyond Yemen, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the UAE is thus in transition from “bromance” to “frenemyship”. It seems that the strategic alliance between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh has collapsed and some observers even expect “a new Gulf rift” similar to the ‘Gulf crisis’ (2017-2021) when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a blockade against Qatar. However, none of the players in the Gulf are interested in a deepening rift. As all require regional stability to achieve their socioeconomic goals, a new Gulf crisis would damage the reputation of the region as a safe haven and an attractive investment location. Thus, the ‘Gulf business model’ is at risk if Saudi Arabia and the UAE as the main economic heavyweights do not find a modus operandi to manage divergences and preserve geoeconomic stability. For instance, states such as Syria, Lebanon and Iraq are concerned about having to take sides as they are heavily reliable on both Saudi and Emirati support. So far, no embassies were closed or ambassadors recalled. From an entrepreneurial perspective, hence, options for alignment and dialogue remain on the table. By promoting de-escalation, the UAE and Saudi Arabia could act as stabilizing powers in an increasingly fragmented region. However, failure to do so risks long-term divisions with destabilizing consequences well beyond Yemen.

About the Author

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