



## [Growing Tensions Between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates Devolve into Full-Scale Confrontation](#)

Heightened tensions between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have increasingly spilled over online in recent weeks and devolved into full-scale confrontation. This has seen a notable transition from previously mostly private diplomatic friction to more open public confrontations which have been characterized by targeted online campaigns and contentious social media discourse regarding competing narratives and areas of discord. Analysts have outlined how the hostile exchanges in the digital sphere mark a dramatic shift from years of carefully crafted rhetoric portraying harmonious ties between the two – with Saudi and Emirati journalists, commentators, and others now openly questioning each other’s motives and actions. Saudi voices have been growingly candid and critical about the UAE’s fueling of conflict and instability throughout the region. This is apparent given Abu Dhabi’s support of abusive paramilitary forces in Sudan and secessionists in Yemen and Somalia – among other destabilizing entities. Observers note that while Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been diverging behind the scenes for years, the discord and direct confrontation have now entered a much more public stage with this expected to continue moving forward.

The overt spillover of tensions became evident for all to see recently in late December when Saudi Arabia conducted airstrikes on a UAE-linked weapons shipment at Yemen’s Mukalla port. Riyadh has publicly condemned the UAE and accused Abu Dhabi of seeking to undermine its national security by backing the Southern Transitional Council (STC) separatist group in Yemen. Saudi Arabia views the fragmentation of Yemen as a direct threat to its southern border. In addition to undeniable friction surrounding developments in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has also grown increasingly critical of the UAE’s role in perpetuating conflict and instability elsewhere in places like Sudan and Somalia. This has seen Saudi Arabia lobby the United States to impose secondary sanctions on the UAE for its arming of the abusive Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan, who have engaged in egregious war crimes and human rights violations. Tensions have even flared recently over the UAE’s ties with secessionists in Somaliland, which Saudi Arabia has also denounced as a threat to regional stability. Overall, Saudi voices have begun publicly denouncing the UAE for what many impartial observers have been seeking to draw attention to for years – Abu Dhabi’s destructive role in sowing instability by supporting disruptive and abusive forces across the region.

The aforementioned Saudi strikes on the UAE weapons shipment were significant for marking the first direct confrontation between the two countries and prompted the UAE to express that they would withdraw any remaining Emirati troops from Yemen. Experts have highlighted how the expanding public discord between the countries boils down to their two fundamentally differing brands of foreign policy. While Saudi Arabia is more focused on bolstering regional stability, the UAE on the other hand is seeking to build what analysts have described as an “axis of secessionists” whereby the Emiratis support a variety of armed non-state entities in places such as Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, and Libya as a means of trying to gain regional influence. Thus, unsurprisingly, this has resulted in Saudi Arabia and the UAE on opposite sides when it comes to an array of regional issues – with this inevitably boiling over into more direct public confrontation. As experts have sought to point out, the competing interests between the two countries are getting more difficult to manage diplomatically, with suggestions being put forth that this is resulting in a kind of “Cold War” taking shape which has manifested in increasing contention online and in public.

The Saudi-UAE rift has deepened further amid some of the latest developments surrounding Yemen. Saudi-backed government forces in Yemen recently launched a major counter-offensive and retook substantial swathes of land from the UAE-backed separatist group – the Southern Transitional Council (STC). These gains effectively reversed those made as a result of the STC’s December offensive and consolidated the internationally recognized government’s control over non-Houthi territory in Yemen. Amid all of this, Saudi Arabia has accused the UAE of smuggling the STC leader out of the country in the dead of night after he skipped planned peace talks in Riyadh, fleeing to Abu Dhabi via Somaliland. To many analysts, this recent occurrence demonstrates the extent of strained relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while indicating that there may be more to come and that ties are expected to remain fraught with friction. There have even been speculations that Saudi Arabia could seek to initiate regime change in the UAE. Irrespective of what may transpire moving forward, the latest course of events in Yemen represent a noteworthy setback to the UAE’s regional strategy of fueling instability, fragmentation, and discord. Ultimately, the growing rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE is likely to have significant implications for the region.