If Yemen remains an indecipherable puzzle for even the most astute of analysts, the Houthis’ decision of late to bring fire and brimstones to the UAE - a player who so far averted the ire of the movement by limiting its meddling to the southern part of the country, a region the Houthis have long decided to abandon to better consolidate their hold in North Yemen, now signal a profound change in dynamics, pushing once more Peace’s goal post.

Although Yemen’s war was always Saudi Arabia’s game, a move aimed to exert control over Sana’a politics so that Riyadh could rest easy as the region’s grand patron, time and ever-changing alliances and interests have turned what was once a clear cut agenda into a maze so complex it is unlikely even its main players have complete visibility over it all - Saudi Arabia least of all. For all Riyadh’s calls for regional military cooperation and lobbying for international support, the kingdom’s agenda no longer aligns with that of its partners … needless to say that it’s showing.

Earlier this January the Houthis launched a series of drone attacks against the UAE, which attacks claimed a reported 3 lives. Speaking to the Arab media Fahmy al Yousifi, Deputy Information Minister of the Houthi government administration, warned that the Houthis would “continue to retaliate against the United Arab Emirates
Mohammed Bakhti, another Houthi advisor in Sanaa, told Qatar’s al Jazeera TV that the group had so far “abstained from attacking the UAE for a long time because it appeared that Abu Dhabi was in the process of pulling its forces out of Yemen ... Now, the situation has changed, again.”

The move marks a significant break in military policy unheard of since 2018, when the UAE chose to dial back its incursion into Yemen’s northern territories to concentrate instead on turning South Yemen into an Emirati hub. Historically Abu Dhabi has always been keen in asserting its influence on Yemen’s southern region - for both geopolitical and commercial reasons. While Yemen may not figure among the highest producers of energy in the region, its geography offers oversight over the world oil route - something the Emirates very much covet to push against not only Saudi Arabia’s regional influence but other players such as Iran, Qatar and Egypt ... not to mention Turkey and the ever sprawling Muslim Brotherhood.

It stands to note that since 2016 the Emirates have siphoned Yemen’s natural gas resources in return for their military cooperation alongside Saudi Arabia - a quid pro quo many Yemenis have taken umbrage to in the light of the devastating poverty which has befallen them; not only that but the simple fact that such activities stand in clear contravention of Yemen’s sovereign rights.

Balhaf seaport which now sits under UAE control (Eastern province of Shabwa) was once upon a time Yemen’s economic lifeline. With an annual income of about $4 billion per annum the seaport was instrumental in ‘plugging’ Yemen to the world energy market and thus allowed for much economic development.

Abu Dhabi’s ambitions now lay far beyond Balhaf ...

Under clear instructions from the Emirates to seek control over Yemen’s energy fields troops from the Giants Brigades - a force largely made up of southern Yemenis who once challenged Yemen’s internationally government to establish the STC (Southern Transitional Council), moved units towards both Shabwah and Marib, directly threatening Houthi strongholds in view of gathering into one powerful hand Yemen’s most valuable riches.

As of today, the various UAE-backed Yemeni forces fighting the Houthis seem to be referred to using the interchangeable umbrella names of “Joint Forces” and “National Resistance Forces” (NRF) - the latter of which was initially used to define the forces led by Brigadier General Tareq Saleh. These forces are made up of three major components: the Giants Brigade, the Guardians of the Republic, and the Tihama Resistance.

The Giants “Al Amaliqah” Brigade is the largest component of the NRF, gathering between 20,000 and 28,000 fighters according to ground sources.

Such intervention in Marib, the last major city in northern Yemen under full government control, a reality the Houthis have fought tirelessly to change, completely flipped the narrative of war, putting the UAE in the Houthis’ direct line of fire.

Sana’a message is clear, for the Emirates to withdraw their efforts away from Marib or face the wrath of further drone attacks and acts of piracy such as the seizure of their ships when crossing the Red Sea - on January 2sd, the Houthis boarded a UAE-flagged vessel off the coast of Hodeidah.

Yemen’s war developments exist far beyond the field! Indeed Abu Dhabi’s move, although somewhat in the benefit of Riyadh in that it seeks to weaken the Houthis’ positions to eventually suffocate their ability to adequately govern through economic starvation, also betrays a political regional rift between the two powers - notwithstanding the security risks that will accompany any further ground escalation.

Now, and this might be a wild guess, amid such uncertainty lies an opportunity - as it is often the case.

Unlike Saudi Arabia whose agenda in Yemen is mainly ideological and thus slightly irrational, the UAE’s ambitions are more pecuniary, and naturally more subject to negotiations.

Should the Houthis chose to strike a bargain with the Emirates to one, see gone the Muslim Brotherhood and two share in Yemen’s natural resources through some economic joint-venture, Saudi Arabia may just be forced to resume peace talks or stand to see its military coalition dissolve.

Evidently such an outcome is far more easier to lay on paper than it would in reality but one could see how Sana’a may wish to play the carrot and the stick to inch Abu Dhabi closer to the negotiating table.
Catherine Shakdam is a research fellow at the Al Bayan Centre for Planning & Studies and a political analyst specializing in radical movements. She is the author of A Tale of Grand Resistance: Yemen, the Wahhabi and the House of Saud. She writes exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 