

UAE hosts Egyptian and Jordanian leaders, bilateral and regional issues discussed



Common threats. Jordanian King Abdullah II (L) and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, on February 7. (Jordanian Royal Palace)

Yemeni government-southern separatist truce holds despite accusations

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Efforts by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to calm tensions between the internationally recognised government of Yemen and the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) seem to have made progress, despite both sides blaming the other for deadly clashes that broke out in Aden.

High-ranking officials on both sides pledged to de-escalate tensions and asked the coalition supporting the government to investigate the causes of recent fighting, in which at least 29 people died.

STC spokesman Lutfi Shatara told the pro-southern Aden al-Ghad newspaper that the council was committed to "de-escalation" and was acting responsibly. He said the Saudi-led coalition was "aware who the obstructing party is," in reference to the clashes.

The internationally recognised government of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi pledged to maintain the peace. Prime Minister Ahmed bin Dagher said the "mission today is to bridge the gap, heal the wounds and abandon political escalation."

"Based on directives from the president, we will work for social reconciliation in Aden and neighbouring provinces to pave the way for comprehensive national reconciliation," bin Dagher said. He also called on Saudi Arabia to investigate the cause of the Aden clashes.

Fighting broke out January 28 after a deadline set by the STC for Hadi to dissolve the government over allegations of corruption and incompetence passed.

Yemeni analysts said the Islamist Al-Islah Party had reached out to different factions to forge new alliances following the Aden talks. Al-Islah, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood movement, was said to be using a political charm offensive to generate support.

The strategy, according to analysts, includes reaching out to members on the fringe of the Southern Movement, including Qatar-backed Hassan Baum, who heads the hard-line wing of the movement, to give the impression that Al-Islah was on good terms with the STC.

Leading the group's media outreach is Hadi's vice-president and one of the founders of Al-Islah, General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar.

Ahmar said he was not opposed to the legitimate peaceful demands of the STC and was prepared to stand with STC Supreme Commander Aidarus al-Zubaidi against the Iran-allied Houthi rebels.

A member of Hadi's government posted a video on social media claiming Aden was back to normal.

"We confirm to you that the government is still here, the government is not besieged and will not be besieged because the government is here to serve the people," Minister of State Salah al-Sayadi posted along with the 2-minute video on Facebook.

He said he posted the video so people "do not fall victim to the rumours and lies being spread by some media and social networking websites."

It seems Al-Islah's outreach was aimed at repairing the group's image following the Aden clashes and a belief that Al-Islah was the main source of dispute within the Hadi government and was hindering the liberation process, especially in the region of Taiz.

Tensions between the STC and the Hadi government are long running. Last May, Hadi dismissed Zubaidi as Aden governor, after which Zubaidi joined forces with the southern separatists.

Many southern Yemenis said they feel exploited by leaders in the north. That sentiment led to the formation in 2007 of the Southern Mobility Movement, which seeks to have South Yemen once again an independent state.

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Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Jordanian King Abdullah II travelled to the United Arab Emirates for official talks with UAE leaders at a time when the Emirates' regional influence has grown because of its efforts in promoting security and stability.

Talks over two days between Sisi and UAE leaders focused on cooperation in political and economic arenas, as well as security matters and methods of fighting "extremism, violence and terrorism," the UAE's WAM news agency reported.

Sisi met with Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, UAE vice-president, prime minister and ruler of Dubai and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan.

"Mohammed bin Rashid and Mohammed bin Zayed discussed means of strengthening our brotherly relations, along with regional and international issues, with the Egyptian president," Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed wrote on his Twitter account.

Officials did not elaborate on the nature of the talks but Egyptian presidential spokesman Basam Radi earlier said Sisi's visit to

the UAE would focus on "means of enhancing political, economic and commercial cooperation and the latest regional developments."

"UAE-Egyptian relations are based on strong foundations of consensus and understanding on regional and international issues," a WAM statement said.

WAM quoted Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed as saying: "The Emirati-Egyptian coordination has proved its hardness over the past years in facing various challenges in the region, foremost of which is the challenge of terrorism, which has become a serious global threat that cannot be tolerated."

King Abdullah expressed gratitude to the UAE for its "sustained support to the kingdom."

Last June, Egypt and the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, severed diplomatic ties with Qatar as well as all air, sea and land links to the Gulf state, over what they described as Qatar's interference in their sovereign affairs and its ties to radical Islamic groups, charges Doha denies.

King Abdullah, whose country enjoys considerable economic and

military ties with the Emirates, met with Sheikh Mohammed in Abu Dhabi February 7 with talks centring on developing joint Arab action on security and stability, especially with regards to fighting terrorism and extremism.

The official Jordanian Petra news agency said King Abdullah expressed gratitude to the UAE for its "sustained support to the kingdom to carry out development projects and its aid in the military field."

The two leaders discussed the Middle East peace process and how to kick-start Palestinian-Israeli negotiations based on a two-state solution.

Both the king and the Abu Dhabi crown prince agreed on the importance of creating a framework that would lead to an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, as proposed by the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.

In a related development, the World Health Organisation announced that 20 medical centres in the Gaza Strip would soon be fully operational thanks to a grant from the UAE. After an emergency appeal from the United Nations, the UAE pledged \$2 million to help end a fuel shortage that affected more than 2 million Gaza natives.

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Viewpoint



Mohammed Alkhereiji

Omani officials gave Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi the red-carpet treatment during his first state visit to the Gulf country. Despite the predictable exchange of pleasantries and well-meaning pledges of enhanced cooperation, the unmentioned elephant in the room was Qatar.

There was no mention of the small Gulf country in official statements issued during the visit but Omani and Egyptian leaders could not see eye to eye on Muscat's neutral position in the dispute pitting Qatar against the Saudi-led Arab quartet.

All signs point to the position of the sultanate on this issue becoming contentious for Egypt and other members of the Arab quartet who resent Doha's cosy relations with Tehran and suspected ties to extremist groups.

Oman, saying it seeks to maintain a policy of regional and

Oman's supposed policy of neutrality does not convince anyone anymore

international neutrality, portrays itself as the "Switzerland of the Middle East." However, with the polarised geopolitical climate in the region as well as the economic challenges facing the sultanate, Muscat's precarious balance is increasingly unrealistic and ultimately untenable.

Fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, which vehemently object to Qatar's policies, are increasingly unconvinced by the sultanate's supposedly non-committed stance on the dispute between Doha and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt. Oman's moves, which include recent agreements with Doha to develop bilateral investments and trade, suggest thinly veiled, undeclared support for Qatar.

Many Gulf analysts agree that the quartet no longer sees Oman as a neutral party. The prevailing view is that the logistical, economic and commercial advan-

tages Muscat provides for Qatar are not much different from Iran's and Turkey's declared support to Doha.

Gulf capitals are also unimpressed by Muscat's official stance of neutrality towards Iran at a time when Tehran's designs are perceived as an existential security threat to the region.

News that Muscat was instrumental in secretly bringing Iran and the United States to the negotiating table that led to the 2015 nuclear agreement, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also did not sit well then with its fellow Arab Gulf countries.

More recently, there was Oman's failure to downgrade diplomatic ties with Iran after the Saudi diplomatic mission in Tehran was attacked by an Iranian mob in January 2016.

Muscat's stand in the Yemen war is also followed with suspicion. While the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates was fighting in support of the internationally recognised government against Iran-allied Houthi rebels, an October 2016 report revealed that Iran had increased its illegal military support to the Houthis and that weapons were being smuggled to Yemen through Oman.

With such questionable stances, it is becoming unrealistic to expect the Saudi-led bloc to continue bailing out Muscat from serious economic woes that cause social unrest in Oman.

In March 2011, GCC countries stepped in to help Oman and Bahrain with a \$20 billion stimulus package but that would be a very unlikely scenario today. The Gulf countries have their own budget concerns and priorities. They are entitled to drawing their conclusions about where each country of the region stands. Oman's so-called neutrality does not convince anyone anymore.



Red-carpet treatment. Omani Deputy Prime Minister Fahd Bin Mahmud al-Said (R) welcomes Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi upon his arrival in Muscat, on February 4. (AFP)