



Residents of al-Mahrah protest peacefully in the city of al-Ghaydha against any Saudi military presence. June 25, 2018.

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The Saudis Bring War to Yemen's East

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A new phase of the war appears to be unfolding in al-Mahra, the far eastern governorate of southern Yemen on the Indian Ocean next to Oman. In 2017 Saudi Arabian troops suddenly rolled through the streets of al-Ghaydha, the governorate capital, taking over the regional airport and announcing that the area had been placed under their security control. They were soon joined by hundreds of conservative Yemeni salafists who had been driven out of the northern part of the country. While Mahari citizens have pushed back against the extremists and continue to demonstrate against the “Saudi invasion,” the real reason for the Saudi presence has become visible: to build a long sought oil pipeline from Saudi Arabia to the Indian Ocean through Mahari lands.

A May 2018 headline in a southern Yemeni newspaper posed a question that many southern Yemenis have been asking themselves: “What is Saudi Arabia doing in

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al-Mahra?”¹ The author, Salih al-Mahuri, a young journalist writing for the youth news site *Raseef22*, lists a number of Saudi initiatives in al-Mahra, the eastern Yemeni governorate bordering Oman, and asks: What is behind this surge in Saudi activity?

Although overt fighting continues in the central and northern parts of Yemen, insecurity remains a daily experience in the southern parts of the country. That insecurity is due to the culture of governing disloyal regions with sporadic violence, which former President Ali Abdullah Salih inaugurated in southern territories after Yemeni unity started to fail. The exception has been al-Mahra in the far east, untouched by the fighting that accompanied the Houthi military offensive into the South in 2015 and spared jihadist violence from al-Qaida operatives. Al-Mahra and its capital al-Ghaydha have been havens in Yemen's climate of near persistent violence since the late 1990s.

Al-Mahra's exceptionalism changed in 2017, however, when United Arab Emirates (UAE) forces extended their military reach into the area. Saudi forces soon arrived with heavy military equipment moving through the narrow streets of al-Ghaydha. Saudi forces have since expanded their footprint militarily, politically and economically. They took control of the major regional airport for military purposes and imposed taxes on the local population. Saudi Arabia is also developing plans for major construction projects, including around the port of Nishtun, located on Indian Ocean sea routes. Al-Mahra is the only area in Yemen that shares a border with both Saudi Arabia and Oman. The airport at al-Ghaydha provides a lifeline to the governorate, which is separated by hundreds of kilometres of desert roads from other parts of the country.

Saudi Arabia claims that its expanding operations in the governorate are merely meant "to stop arms smuggling to Houthi militia."² Saudi officials contend that Iran smuggles arms through the land border with Oman and through Nishtun and the local airport in al-Ghaydha. Mahari authorities strongly deny these claims. While it is true that al-Mahra has for decades been a conduit for smuggling routes not only between Oman and Yemen, but also between Saudi Arabia and Yemen—consumer goods in exchange for alcohol and the leafy stimulant qat—there is little evidence that Houthis are obtaining arms through these routes. Indeed, with Houthis in control of much of the Yemeni army and its weapons stocks, their need for externally sourced armaments is questionable.

For many in al-Mahra, Saudi claims about the region being an arms delivery site to the Houthi militia is perceived as an excuse for a Saudi invasion of their governorate. Saudi troops are in al-Mahra, many locals argue, because it is pursuing a long-held plan to gain land access to the Indian Ocean for its oil exports, including a pipeline originating in Saudi Arabia to al-Mahra, where an expanded port could develop oil tanker capacities. Such a pipeline would allow Saudi Arabia to bypass the risky Strait of Hormuz passageway from the Gulf, through which most Saudi oil exports must pass in order to reach global markets.

Since the war in Yemen began in 2015, media throughout the southern part of Yemen—the area that until May 1990 formed the independent state known as the People's

Democratic Republic of Yemen—have reported in separate sections news about Yemen and the South, as if these were two separate countries. The war has only strengthened the resolve of many in the South to end Yemeni unity and become independent. How that should happen, and what kind of new state should emerge, is one of the central questions that divide its inhabitants.

But with the growing Saudi presence in the region's east—its armed forces, construction companies and political influence—another dividing line concerns the desirability of the continued involvement in southern politics of the two main anti-Houthi coalition countries—Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In this context, the United Nations (UN) mediation process to end the war in Yemen is largely focused on ending the overt violence and fighting in the central and northern parts of the country. But a new and consequential phase of the war, fought not with bombs but through construction projects and aid—and expansionist ambitions—appears to be unfolding in the far eastern realms of southern Yemen. This war is being waged between the leading coalition parties, the Saudis and the Emiratis, over influence in the Yemeni South, the strategically important part of Yemen along the Bab al-Mandeb Strait that connects the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea.

Al-Mahra's Isolated History

Foreign interest in Yemen's east is relatively new. The area that formed the Sultanate of Qishn and Soqatra until the British Empire withdrew in 1967 from South Yemen was remote and not very prosperous. Prior to southern independence from Great Britain, the Sultanate of Qishn (today's al-Mahra) and Soqatra—and its ruling Al Afrar family—had its throne on Hadibu, the main town of the island of Soqatra some 300 kilometres off the coast of al-Mahra. The socialists who took over in South Yemen after driving out the British established the present governorate center of al-Ghaydha, opening schools and a central hospital in the region. While neither telephone lines nor asphalt roads connected the area to the capital of Aden, Maharis slowly developed the area, led by people who believed that everybody should have access to health and education.

Al-Mahra played a crucial role in the rebellion in Dhufar, across the border in Oman.³ The People's Front for the Liberation of Oman pushed for a social revolution and women's emancipation similar to what took place in South Yemen. But these two regions have a much longer history of shared culture, including pre-Arab languages, linking them more closely to each other than to their regional capitals. Following that rebellion, South Yemen and Oman built warm relations and the border remained open for local people to cross, as I witnessed in the late 1980s.

When I lived in al-Ghaydha in 1992, the local authorities took me to visit the town's power station, a small hut located

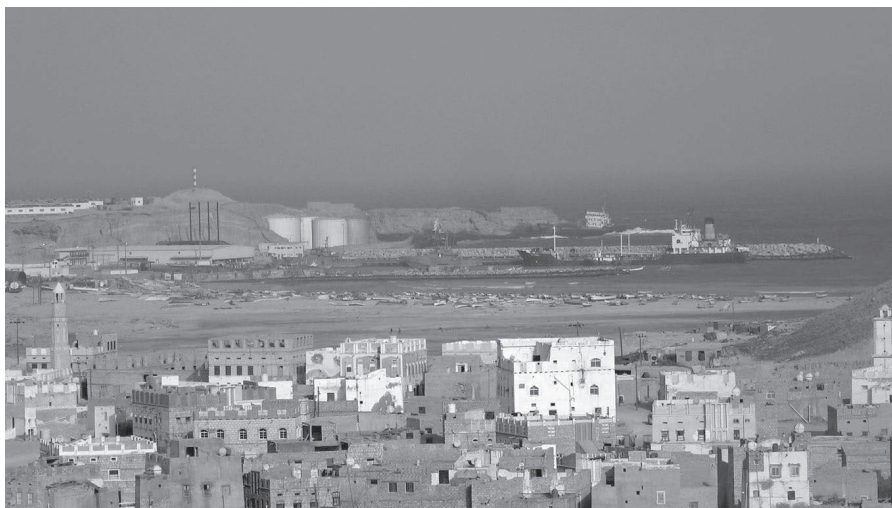
on a hill overlooking the town. The hut's small generator was the first such power supply in the town. From the hill I could see how one part of al-Ghaydha was entirely dark while another had a scattering of lights. The chief in charge of power supply then turned a switch on the generator, and the illuminated and non-illuminated parts of the town reversed. The power supply was clearly insufficient for the entire town, whose needs at that time were increasing due to the arrival of air conditioners.

Even with Yemeni unification in 1990, al-Mahra remained a forgotten corner of the country desperately trying to strengthen a central state structure. In the capital Sanaa, I even met government officials who were unaware that al-Mahra belonged to Yemen. The situation changed only when Maharis who worked abroad began to invest in the area, generating the kind of wealth needed to develop. The near-open borders between Oman and Yemen further benefited al-Mahra, although the Omani Sultanate never engaged in large-scale projects in this neighboring region.

Al-Mahra remained outside of conflict and upheaval during and after the 2011 uprisings against Salih's rule. The region even managed to avoid involvement in the war that followed the takeover of Sanaa by the Houthis—with the backing of Salih and troops loyal to him—in September 2014 and their military offensive into the South in early 2015. Many southerners joined the anti-Houthi coalition led by acting President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, which was soon taken over by Saudi Arabia and its foreign partners—the UAE in particular. Most southerners did not want war but were quick to militarize once the Houthis launched an offensive on southern territories. The war over Aden lasted approximately three months, with government-aligned forces and southern supporters together pushing out the Houthis. In many southern narratives, the war is between the North and the South, the second such war since Yemeni unity in 1990. Residents of al-Mahra, however, remained largely uninvolved.

The Saudis Come to al-Mahra

The war began to directly impact al-Mahra only in 2017, when Emirati troops arrived to expand its Security Belt initiative over the entirety of southern Yemen. That initiative consists of local men trained and recruited under Emirati command. Local authorities, among them the self-nominated Sultan of al-Mahra, Abdullah bin Isa Al Afrar, rejected the deployment,



Nishtun seaport, al-Mahrah governorate, 2018.

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saying that the governorate had its own means of security.⁴ Even though Al Afrar is one of the founders of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the primary coordinating body seeking to reclaim southern independence, the sultan has kept open the idea of the re-establishment of the sultanate that ruled al-Mahra and Soqatra until 1967. The STC works in close collaboration with the Emiratis, who thus were forced to drop the idea of extending their presence into al-Mahra. While collaborating with the Emiratis, STC leaders have repeated their objection to foreign troops being stationed in the southern territories once it is independent.

The close alliance between the Emiratis and the STC—the leading southern political force—has made Saudis consider their future role in post-war Yemen. The Saudis are aware that Hadi, whom they unreservedly support, has a diminishing power base in the country, even in the South. At the same time, their Emirati coalition partners are working to secure good relations with the STC, elements of which will most likely rule the South in some form once the war is over.

It was in this context of increased Emirati engagement with southern leaders that Saudi troops arrived in 2017, again without any consultation with the local authorities. Unlike the Emiratis, however, the Saudis apparently had obtained Hadi's sponsorship to enter the governorate. When Hadi visited al-Mahra in August 2018, he was received not by local authorities but by the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed al-Jaber.⁵ The first action of the Saudi military was to take over al-Ghaydha civil airport and reserve it for military purposes. According to former deputy governor of al-Mahra and a senior army officer, Shaykh Ali Salim Al-Harizi, following the arrival of troops Hadi's vice president, Col. Ali Muhsin, had assured the local authorities that the purpose of the Saudi military presence was only to provide the coalition logistical support and to combat smuggling in the region.⁶ As al-Harizi explained in an interview, local

residents were suspicious of the vice president's assurance and directly asked troops whether they belonged to the anti-Houthi coalition. The answer was no; these were troops for Saudi Arabia only. For many locals, this Saudi presence thus meant Saudi military occupation.

Ali Muhsin, Salih's former right hand who turned against the then-president during the 2011 uprising, is known across Yemen for his involvement whenever there is unrest in the country. Throughout the war, he has been active on the eastern front, including in the oil-rich Marib and Hadhramaut governorates. Muhsin's arrival in al-Mahra underlines Saudi Arabia's interest in this eastern corner of the country not only during the war, but more importantly for the power struggle sure to come when the war finally ends. Muhsin is likely to emerge a key player in the reconfiguration of power in Yemen.

The long-standing governor of al-Mahra, Muhammad Abdullah Kuddah, sought to impose limits on Saudi involvement in the governorate, including limiting the airport to civilian flights. He also demanded that all decisions about military deployments be made together with the local authorities. In response, Hadi replaced Kuddah with a more Saudi-friendly politician, Rajah Sa'id Bakrit, also a long-time politician in al-Mahra.

Like many prominent Mahari tribesmen and dignitaries, Kuddah holds Omani citizenship, a move Oman took following the Saudi policy dating to pre-unity times of gaining loyalty in Yemen by allocating citizenship to key political players. Oman's own aim in al-Mahra has been to support close and neighborly relations with Maharis, a connection with long historical roots. Oman has maintained a neutral position in the Yemeni war, even though it has not publicly expressed opposition to the Saudi and Emirati manoeuvres in al-Mahra. Instead, Oman has sought to keep the area under its influence.⁷ The former deputy governor, al-Harizi, described the presence of Saudi forces in the governorate as an occupation.⁸ He warned the Saudis that if they do not retreat, a military response might ensue. In 2018, the Saudis similarly accused the Emiratis of occupying Soqatra.⁹

Maharis Push Back

Mahari residents have since 2018 organized a number of protests against the Saudi presence. The protesters demanded that the airport in al-Ghaydha be returned to civil use, that the seaport in Nishtun be returned to local control and that Mahari fishermen can resume full activities in the sea. Saudi Arabia imposed an import tax of 100 percent on trade between Yemen and Oman in late August 2018, sending the price of food and consumer goods skyrocketing. Protesters demanded that all foreign military forces immediately withdraw from their governorate and that the government focus on improving the harsh circumstances of their neglected corner of the country. Saudi

Arabia responded by adopting the tactic of its partner in war, the UAE, of promising reconstruction and aid projects alongside its military forces. It also reduced income taxes and allowed fishermen to resume their activities. When Hadi visited al-Mahra in August 2018, Saudi Arabia announced plans to initiate eight development projects to improve the living conditions of Mahari people.¹⁰

Those projects included a 264-KW power generator, 15 water tanks, extensions to al-Ghaydha's central hospital and a new hospital with a university as part of the King Salman Education and Medical City. Given that the governorate's human resources are very limited, the university will likely be run directly by Saudi authorities. More than 192,000 school books were also printed for primary school pupils throughout the governorate.¹¹ In a ceremony chaired by Saudi-friendly local authorities, the first batch of books was distributed to smiling school children.¹² While the education system across the entire country collapsed as a result of the war and the humanitarian crisis, the reality was that Yemeni education was already in steep decline following unification in 1990. A new southern teachers' trade union actively promotes reform, including writing a qualitatively better curriculum. But for the southern teacher-activists who have protested poor quality text books from Sanaa for years, the news of Saudi penetration into the education field was more bad news.

Together these projects illustrate that Saudi Arabia has made progress in its long-aspired plan to gain land access to the Indian Ocean for oil exports by building an oil pipeline from Kharkhir on the Saudi side of the border through al-Mahra to the sea. The Saudi-based marine construction company, Huta Marines, has been asked to provide a project plan to expand and develop oil tanker facilities at Nishtun, the small seaport built by the Danish government in the 1980s.¹³ While the Saudi projects that have been promised to al-Mahra appear lavish, the total expenditure will be dwarfed by the economic benefits that will befall the kingdom if its tankers gain an open over-land avenue to the Indian Ocean.

Even more alarming for many Maharis is that Saudi troops did not come alone. Residents in the coastal town of Qishn were surprised in January 2018 when their small town was suddenly filled with men with long beards. The newcomers offered large amounts of money to buy local properties. The men belonged to the Dar al-Hadith Institute, a prominent salafi institute formerly located in Dammaj in Saada, in the north of Yemen. That institute was forced to close following a Houthi siege and assault in the area in 2014.¹⁴ Lebanese and Yemeni media reported that Yahya bin al-Hajuri, the salafi shaykh who had managed the Dar al-Hadith institute in Saada, arrived in Qishn to oversee the establishment of the new center.¹⁵ The move concerned neighboring Oman, which has resisted the expansion of Islamist extremism into its territory.

The sudden influx of hundreds of salafists led local women in Qishn to organize protests against the establishment of the institute and appeal to local shaykhs, tribes and land-owners to not sell land to the newcomers. According to the statement issued by the women, “thousands of northern extremists have arrived to our small town and started to purchase land for the purpose of establishing an extremist community.”¹⁶ The women appealed to the governor of al-Mahra to stop what they considered to be an invasion. Pressured by the protests, the governor quickly issued an order banning the establishment of religious institutes without the approval of the local authority. The order also indicated that displaced persons could not settle in the area without the permission of local authorities.¹⁷

What initially was the purpose of bringing potential extremism to an area that historically has been free of religious puritanism? The Lebanese newspaper *al-Akhhbar* suggested that the goal was to establish “a salafi emirate” in the neighborhood of Oman and perhaps the Saudis intended to provoke the sultanate to take a stand. For the Hadi regime, the fact that the students of Dar al-Hadith Institute had become militarized and joined the war has been a problem to be solved; many of those students had relocated to relatively tolerant places, such as Taiz and Hodeida, where many currently fight. Al-Mahra might have provided a solution—an isolated location where they could resume their studies, which also might prevent them from making the full transition to militant jihadism.

The New Front of the Yemen War

To be sure, the Saudi adoption of Emirati tactics that proved successful elsewhere in the South—troops arriving with aid and development assistance—has had some success in al-Mahra. The protests in al-Mahra stopped after the Saudis entered into negotiations with local representatives and promised to respect their key demands, including the lifting of import taxes at the Oman border. In September 2018, however, the protests resumed as locals felt that the Saudis were not living up to their promises; in November, the Saudis fired on demonstrators, killing one.¹⁸ Security sources in al-Ghaydha attest that the order came from Governor Bakrit, who accused the demonstrators of being smugglers.¹⁹ Since then, protests seem to have waned, and a number of tribes have stopped opposing the Saudi plans. Saudis have likely cut deals directly with local tribal leaders; almost simultaneously, a media campaign celebrated the promised Saudi development and assistance projects.

Many locals are taking a more critical look at the expanding Saudi footprint in al-Mahra. As Abd al-Jabar al-Jariri, one of the young Mahari activists, wrote in a blog post, “The sons of al-Mahra are not naïve; like other Yemenis, they know that the main objective of the Saudi forces in al-Mahra is securing the oil pipeline, which the

kingdom intends to extend through the territory of the Mahari people.” Maharis who hold Saudi passports were not, he notes, issued the identity cards that would allow them full rights in the kingdom. Indeed, thousands of Yemenis, Maharis among them, have been forced to leave Saudi Arabia since the start of the war.

Despite mounting international pressure on Saudi Arabia to end the catastrophic war, especially after the brutal murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudis appear to have little interest in seeing the conflict in Yemen end. Saudi Arabia has stated openly that its first priority in the war is to ensure that what it considers to be the legitimate government of Hadi remains in power. The kingdom’s second stated priority is to ensure that the Houthis military attacks across the southern Saudi border permanently cease. But an unstated and perhaps more important priority may well be to permanently secure access to the Indian Ocean. The UN peace mediation process is slowly working toward implementing the two first objectives, and Yemeni troops on the ground are determined to reclaim more areas from Houthi control. All that remains of Saudi plans is to secure its dominance in al-Mahra province, the chosen place for Saudi expansionist policies. As a result, the true front of the war is now in the east. ■

Endnotes

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