



YEMEN-UAE: SPARRING OVER SOCOTRA

By
Arhama Siddiq
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

May 16, 2018

(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Yemen is immersed in yet another conflict – this time centered around the island of Socotra. The most recent power struggle is in between the Yemeni government and its ambitious ally, the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

On May 9, 2018 the UAE positioned its troops on the island, capturing strategic positions. This riled the Yemeni government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, which says it was not told of the move.¹ The clash has brought Yemen's three-year-old civil war to Socotra's shores for the first time, and the island's 60,000 residents are now caught in the middle.

After this incident, Yemen's Prime Minister Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr arrived on Socotra with a small delegation in an effort to restate Yemeni authority after rumors of the UAE's alleged intentions to annex the strategically important island increased.² The Emirates responded a few days after the prime minister's arrival by evicting all civilian and Yemeni military personnel from the airstrip and port, both of which it controls.

Socotra Archipelago, in the northwest Indian Ocean near the Gulf of Aden, is 250 km long and encompasses four islands and two rocky islets which appear as an extension of the Horn of Africa.³ The site is of universal importance because of its biodiversity with rich and diverse flora and fauna. In addition to this, once at the heart of ancient silk and spice trading routes between the Arab world,

¹ "Tensions Rise on Yemen's Socotra after UAE Deployment," *Middle East Eye*.

² Water-Gen Ltd. | *Israel Defense*.

³ UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Socotra Archipelago," *UNESCO World Heritage Centre*.

Africa and Asia, today, the island lies in the middle of one of the world's most important oil trading channels.

In and of itself, it also combines the UAE's military and economic interests. It is thought that the UAE seeks to convert the island into a permanent military outpost. This indeed seems to ring true since the UAE has built a military base there in addition to setting up communications networks, conducting its own census, subsidizing education and even inviting Socotra residents to Abu Dhabi by the planeload for free healthcare and special work permits.⁴ Furthermore, according to Yemeni media, the military base has provided jobs for up to 5,000 newly recruited soldiers and the UAE reportedly tops up police and government salaries.⁵

It should be noted that the UAE has over time become the world's third-largest importer of arms and one of only eleven countries to maintain permanent military bases outside its own borders.⁶ Socotra is the latest acquisition in the UAE's growing modern empire: other such Emirati projects include ventures in Eritrea, Djibouti, Somaliland and the Yemeni island of Perim. While it may seem Abu Dhabi was merely lending a helping hand to improvised citizens, the reality is they were conducting a quiet takeover through a strategic blend of both hard and soft power.

This ongoing development has been taking place for quite some time now under the umbrella of the wider operation against the Houthis. Over the decades, the UAE has marketed itself as a merchant country. Securing Socotra is an ideal opportunity for them. While there is of course the vast investment component, there is also a simultaneous military element to their designs as well. The latter being that since they have secured these strategic ports, they can ensure freedom of trade in this part of the world.

What does this mean for the wider war in Yemen?

The UAE is part of the Saudi-led coalition fighting Houthi rebels in the country and is a former ally of Hadi, but ruptures have been emerging since the start of 2018 between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While Riyadh with its focus on eliminating the Iranian-backed proxies has concentrated in the North of Yemen, Abu Dhabi - with its emerging ulterior motives - has maintained positions in the South of

⁴ Shadiah Abdullah Al Jabry, "UAE Delivers a Lifeline for Yemenis," *The National*, June 4, 2014.

⁵ "It's Not the Bullets Forcing Yemeni Troops Off the Battlefield. It's the Pay," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017.

⁶ "Asia and the Middle East Lead Rising Trend in Arms Imports, US Exports Grow Significantly, Says SIPRI," *SIPRI*.

the country. The Yemen war has claimed nearly 10,000 lives since its inception, triggering what the United Nations has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis.⁷

On 8 May, Arab coalition spokesperson Turki al Maliki stated that the dispute had been solved. "An agreement has been reached on a comprehensive, joint method of coordination between both parties,"⁸ he said. However, many islanders immediately dismissed this claim and instead more protests ensued. The United Arab Emirates, facing criticism from top Yemeni allies over its presence on the island of Socotra, have stated that its role on the strategic Yemeni territory had been "distorted".⁹ The UAE foreign ministry blamed the Muslim Brotherhood for drumming up anti-Emirati sentiment over the island.

It just goes to show that at the end of the day, it is the realism theory at play and each country will always look at its own interests first. It should also be noted that while the UAE took part in blaming Qatar for trying to pursue independent policies outside of the GCC, it is hypocritically immersed in doing the same. Socotra might end up being collateral damage if Riyadh puts a stop to the Emiratis agenda because this puts into question the sustainability of the Saudi-coalition itself – the arrival of the Saudi delegation to partake in mediation efforts shows their angst.

If Abu Dhabi keeps pursuing its interests without sanction from the Kingdom, they may as well start finding common ground with the rebels instead, because ultimately the UAE do not look at the Houthis as an existential threat. All these events also show that while the UAE have a better, long-term and dynamic understanding of regional politics, Saudi Arabia have been more US centric and undertaken erratic decisions.

But all said, at the end of the day Yemen is still a sovereign albeit war-torn country and the people of Yemen have the right to decide who can and cannot come into their territory.

⁷ "10 UAE-backed Troops Killed in Yemen," *Opinion | Thenews.com.pk | Karachi*.

⁸ The New Arab, "UAE, Yemen 'reach Deal' on Socotra Island following Tensions," *Alaraby*, May 08, 2018.

⁹ Afp, "UAE Says Military Presence on Yemen's Socotra 'distorted'," *Daily Mail Online*, May 06, 2018.