



Strategy Unit

Geopolitical

10- May - 2018

Yemeni Socotra ..

Under the UAE Occupation



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Preface:

The United Arab Emirates, the second force in the Saudi-led Arab Coalition against the Houthis, sent military troops to Socotra Island in the Indian Ocean on April 30, 2018 without permission from the internationally-recognized government. The troops - over 300 soldiers, armored personnel carriers and tanks – took control of the island’s port and airport. UAE also deployed military forces to besiege a naval brigade stationed on the island, and prevented Yemeni officials from entering the airport to receive a Saudi delegation that arrived in the island to resolve the dispute between UAE and the government. This event launched a more difficult phase of relations within the Arab Coalition.

The dispute is the latest in a series of disputes between the internationally-recognized authority of President Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi and Abu Dhabi since the first quarter of 2016. The most prominent of these differences was in January 2018 when the National Army was fighting against paramilitary militias financed and trained by the UAE in Aden (the country’s interim capital), the matter which reflected relations within the coalition and made it more fragile.

The Socotra Island has an ecological nature that is uncommon and the strangest in the world. Two thirds of creatures and trees on the island are not found anywhere else on the planet. They were added to the World Heritage List in 2008 ⁽¹⁾ . The island enjoys a strategic location that tempts the colonial military forces. Throughout the modern history, the strategic island was able to avoid the setbacks of attempts to turn it into a military base in order to occupy the «Horn of Africa» and the «Arabian Peninsula.» The island is located near the strategic strait (Bab al-Mandab), which makes the military concentration on the island greatly affect the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa, and threatening the global trade.

The UAE presence on the island

The UAE began to exist on the island after two hurricanes struck the island in October 2015 in order to rescue 60,000 people. The UAE used the Red Crescent and the Sheikh Khalifa Foundation as a cover to expand and control Socotra Island and its poor people who depend upon fishing, animal husbandry and little farming.

The UAE has taken control of the island in many ways, most notably:

- Government support:

In February 2016, Vice President, Khalid Bahah, held a press conference on the island alongside with the UAE Red Crescent, announcing the signing of contracts with the UAE authorities for the reconstruction of Socotra Island ⁽²⁾. About 40 days after the conference, Bahah was removed from his position. The dismissal of Bahah caused tension between Abu Dhabi and President Abdrabbo Mansour Hadi. In May 2018, as the crisis over the island escalated between the UAE and the Yemeni government, Khaled Bahah

denied that he had leased the island to the UAE for 99 years. A month before the signing of the agreement with the UAE Red Crescent, Minister of Tourism - Muammar Al-Iryani expressed the government's desire to found a special tourism company in Socotra in cooperation with businessmen from the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The UAE has unusually welcomed those statements. ⁽³⁾

- Military presence:

The UAE military commander (Abu Saif) moved from Mukalla in Hadramout to Socotra and Abu Dhabi opened a military base and registered recruits (5000) of the people of the island within the UAE forces with a salary of 500 dirhams ⁽⁴⁾. This coincided at the same time with the signing of contracts between the Yemeni government and UAE organizations for relief works.⁽⁵⁾ There was no need to recruit and build a military base there as there were no potential security or military threats, and no combat groups.

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- The purchase of lands:

Abu Dhabi started the purchase of lands of Socotra after the removal of “Bahah”, and appointed one an Emirati leader called Abu Mubarak Al-Mazroei as governor of the island. Al-Mazroei paid large amounts of money to poor residents to buy their lands for investment purpose. For money and in order to get out of poverty, the poor people sold lands on the island ⁽⁶⁾, although the government has banned the selling of lands on the island and considered it illegal. ⁽⁷⁾

- Relief work:

The UAE has justified its presence in Socotra as a relief work after the 2015 hurricane. Residents of the island initially welcomed the UAE relief but they were unhappy with the construction works and UAE bulldozers that targeted the island and uprooted rare trees to build homes for Abu Dhabi elders and political leaders.⁽⁸⁾ This ultimately pushed the residents to turn to the international community to exert pressure on Abu Dhabi to stop the destruction of the island. The UAE’s relief aid to the population of Socotra was not that so much useful but just a media propaganda.⁽⁹⁾

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The objectives of the Emirates in Socotra

Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed wants to keep the island at all costs, according to the French-based Intelligence Online⁽¹⁰⁾. The strategic island has many elements that Abu Dhabi sees as fulfilling its ambition to be a regional power in the region, even if that provoked



its Gulf neighbors and the Yemeni government.

These objectives include:

- A military base:

Abu Dhabi has a military base on the island that contains 5000 Yemeni fighters⁽¹¹⁾ and this military base will be “Emirati Diego Garcia” (an island that Britain and America expelled its original people and turned it into a military base located in the Indian Ocean). In fact, Socotra has a high strategic location - larger than Diego Garcia – as it controls the entrance to the Gulf of Aden from the Indian Ocean; it is the gateway to 23% of the world’s oil and energy supplies.

During the decades of the Cold War, there were rumors that Yemen - the south - the only Marxist country in the Arab world. It was far from being entangled at the request of the Soviet Union, which was planning to use it as a secret military base.⁽¹²⁾

In April 2017, there were leaks that spoke of an agreement between Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed and the Russian president on granting Russia a military base in Yemen - in Socotra in particular⁽¹³⁾ - after Moscow failed to obtain a base in the Horn of Africa because the countries there refused any Russian military presence in light of the existence of military bases for the rest of the world countries.

- Economic investment:

UAE developers are building foundations for hotels and apartments on the island, and contractors are attacking the natural protectorate of the island

and destroying the natural environment to build hotels in the center of the national protectorate in an attempt to replace the island’s charming nature with cement blocks, which may pull the island out of the World Heritage List. Expectations say that any continued constructions may destroy the island within 10 years.⁽¹⁴⁾

- The reflection on the national security of the region:

Abu Dhabi aims to be an influential regional force in the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, and since the presence of a military base on the island of Mayyun (Perim) in the Strait of Bab Al-Mandab caused global, local and regional disturbance - which eventually resulted

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in stopping the establishment of a military base on the island⁽¹⁵⁾ and making it a training camp for Yemenis, UAE established a military base in Eritrea and another one in the Republic of Somaliland. UAE sees that it need an advanced military base, primarily affecting Somalia, Djibouti, Yemen and Oman, so UAE considers Socotra, which is close to all these countries, as part of its national security.

Repercussions

The recent UAE military presence on the island of Socotra has provoked a wave of government and popular discontent. “The situation in Socotra after controlling the airport and the port is in fact a reflection of disagreement between the legitimacy and brothers in the UAE, and its essence is the dispute over the national sovereignty and who has the right to practice it,” ⁽¹⁶⁾ the Yemeni government said in its letter to the Security Council. Saudi Arabia tried to reach solutions, but the first attempts to send a delegation to the island in early May 2018 failed, followed with attempts to convince

Abu Dhabi to withdraw from the island.

According to the Hague Regulations of 1907, the presence of military forces of a state in the territory of a foreign state without any official authorization is considered an occupation of that region ⁽¹⁷⁾ regardless of the reason for that presence or its way, as long as Abu Dhabi prevented the legitimate power from exercising its authority and influence. The most significant repercussions of the UAE move:

- The internationally- recognized government has stepped up against the UAE, saying it is a reflection of dispute between them and the Saudi-led Arab Coalition, which alarms a disintegration within the coalition in favor of the Houthis.
- With the failure of the Saudi authorities to contain the situation, Yemen handed over a briefing to the UN Security Council on May 9, 2018, indicating that the dispute with the UAE threatens “the national sovereignty.” Abu Dhabi did not expect the escalation to reach such extent by the internationally-recognized government



and that the briefing has been kept as an official document in the Security Council No. (4402018/ S), which prompted the US State Department to call for strengthening the sovereignty of Yemen and the safety of its territories.⁽¹⁸⁾

- The UAE had spoken in a statement, in response to the presence of its troops, saying that was a result of a historical relationship between the population of Socotra and the UAE ⁽¹⁹⁾. But the government escalation comes to explain the following:

- The United Arab Emirates has already violated Security Council resolution 2216, which emphasizes the preservation of Yemen's territorial integrity, and violated the main objective for which the Saudi-led Arab Coalition has been established. This puts UAE in one basket with Iran that is accused of violating the same resolution. This issue makes the UAE and its other entities in southern Yemen vulnerable to sanctions from the international community, which does not reflect the image that Abu Dhabi wants to deliver to the community itself as a force that fights terrorism and is abide to the international resolutions as a rising power in the region instead of Saudi Arabia "which bears the blame for tragedies of the war in Yemen", the message that Abu Dhabi wants to convey.
- The Yemeni government and Saudi Arabia that supports it, have been fed up with the way the United Arab Emirates manages the liberated provinces and the construction of new forces

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and camps in the southern provinces that threaten the future of the Yemeni state, and they believe that this is the only opportunity to make the international community - the new White House- warn against the military presence of the UAE in Yemen.

- The Sultanate of Oman is moving internationally and regionally to stop the UAE presence on Socotra Island. In the later stages, the Gulf States, except the UAE, and the Horn of Africa



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countries will support the Yemeni government to stop the UAE presence. This move will be based on the Turkish position which considered the UAE presence in Socotra as a threat. ⁽²⁰⁾ The American and British condemnations seem to be in the same direction⁽²¹⁾

- Increasing fears of any disintegration within the Arab Coalition due to the growing crisis between Abu Dhabi and the Yemeni government since the events of January 2018 ⁽²²⁾, without achieving any prominent victory against the Houthis or finding a common goal for all parties in the Arab Coalition, as the main goal is to liberate the port of Hodeidah from the Houthis; this is considered to be an attempt by UAE to escape from the main battle that the UAE has been manipulating to get concessions from Saudi Arabia.
- In conjunction with the Socotra crisis, the United States withdrew from the nuclear agreement,

and certainly there is no relationship between the two, but the withdrawal will prompt Saudi Arabia to accelerate the victory against the Houthis and control the ports that are believed to be smuggling outlets, as the failure of Tehran's diplomatic efforts to return Washington to the agreement with European pressures may push Iran to send more specific weapons to the Houthis to target Riyadh and threaten the American interests in the region.

Scenarios of the Socotra Island Future:

The First Scenario:

Saudi Arabia may solve the crisis between the Yemeni government and the UAE diplomatically. This means negotiating the economic advantages of Abu Dhabi in return for the military withdrawal and the return of the island to the sovereignty of the Yemeni state. The possibility of achieving this scenario is weak if we return to the main objectives

of the UAE.

The Second Scenario:

Based on the main objectives of the UAE, for which it entered Yemen, to become a regional and international power that controls ports and energy resources ⁽²³⁾, the most likely scenario is that the UAE may militarily and economically control Socotra Island and accelerate some measures on the island as follows:

- 1 - Measures to make a demographic change through the naturalization of the majority of the population of Socotra and the transfer of many of them to live in the UAE and returning them to manage the island, and the transfer of some leaders and soldiers who are loyal to UAE from other southern provinces to do military and security duties in the island.
- 2 – Launching service and investment projects that may change the features of the island and making media circulation that the island will become tourist and economic destination for the world, another Hong Kong, in order to win the sympathy of the poor people of the southern provinces.
- 3- Trying to speed up the signing of military and economic contracts with US, Russian, Chinese and other European parties, which may be unofficial, as UAE is an occupying power and a reality on the island.
- 4 - Providing services to Saudi Arabia related to facilitating the task of liberating Hodeidah.

UAE may also use chaos and assassinations against civilians or military or local leaders or government officials in the island and outside it to distract Yemenis from the goal of restoring the island.

This scenario is likely as the performance of the Yemeni government is weak and its opportunities are limited. It is also likely if Saudi Arabia's position remains weak or supportive or complicit with the UAE. What makes this scenario strong is the UAE occupation of the island in May when the Socotra Island is closed for six months due to sea frenzy and hurricanes. Only big aircrafts can fly to the island while it is difficult to deliver military and food supplies across the sea.

Scenario 3:

If the government begins to move in its diplomatic options through further escalation in the international community and moving the island liberation paper militarily from the UAE occupation, this will push Saudi Arabia to exert pressure on the UAE to prevent an embarrassing confrontation between its allies in the field. But that does not mean that the island will return to the sovereignty of Yemen. Riyadh exploits these events and the concern of Yemenis and their Omani neighbors over the escalation of the UAE in order to include Socotra under the Saudi influence after Hadramout and Mahrah.⁽²⁴⁾

Margins:

- 1- Socotra Archipelago <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1263/>
- 2- Bahah signs agreement with the United Arab Emirates on the rehabilitation of Socotra Island, Al-Yaqeen, 29 February 2016 <http://yaqeenonline.net/2013-10-31-22-27-22/898- Bahah-sign-with-UAE-agreement - Rehabilitation - Socotra Island>
- 3- Minister of Tourism confirms that the island of Socotra will be the tourist front of Yemen 22/01 / 2016 http://www.sabanew.net/viewstory_1.php? Id = 4021
- 4- One of the sons of Socotra talk to the researcher of the Abaad Center
- 5- News published by the Emirates newspaper in February 2016 speaks about the end of the enrollment of personnel in the armed forces <https://www.emaratalyom.com/local-section/other/2016-02-06-1.866956>
Residents and government official comments to the British website “Verdict”
- 6- The UAE appears to be building a Dubai-style resort on Yemen’s island of Socotra <https://www.verdict.co.uk/uae-building-dubai-style-resort-on-yemens-otherworldly-island-of-socotra-officials-and-islanders-say>
- 7- It is noteworthy that the Yemeni government approved in 2013 to cancel all contracts of sale or lease of the coasts of Socotra, issued by any party. In January 2017, the Yemeni government issued another decree prohibiting the sale of Socotra lands. <Http://www.yemenmonitor.com/Details/ArtMID/908/ArticleID/14913>
- 8- A local website (Yemen Net) published a report on the UAE activity on the island supported by photos in August 2017 <https://theyemen.net>
- 9- A report by Yemen Shabab Net reveals the difference between reality and UAE figures, published in May 2015, available at: <https://yemenshabab.net/news/35255>
- 10- Socotra island: the Emirates hold the wild card in Yemeni conflict 2017 <https://www.intelligenceonline.com/grey-areas/2017/12/27/socotra-island-the-emirates-hold-the-wild-card-in-yemeni-conflict,108287456-art>
- 11- Previous source
- 12- Socotra and the benefits of obscurity <https://blogs.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/onmyplate/103390/>
- 13- Russia and the UAE: Friends with Benefits <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-and-the-uae-friends-with-benefits>
- 14- The British website “Verdict”, previous source.
- 15- Satellite images showed the withdrawal of the UAE from the island, although it was about to complete the building of a military base, Jains: UAE stops work on Bab al-Mandab island base <http://www.janes.com/article/78929/uae-stops-work- on-bab-al-mandab-island-base>
- 16- <http://www.sabanew.net/viewstory/32788>
- 17- Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land (ICR) <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/62tc8a.htm>
- 18- <https://ye.usembassy.gov/en/statement-by-heather-nauert-situation-on-the-yemeni-island-of-socotra-en/>
- 19- UAE Foreign Minister’s Statement on May 7, in addition to statements made by the UAE official press to Anwar Gargash, UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs.
- 20- Turkish Foreign Ministry statement May 10
- 21- Britain follows America and Turkey and clarifies its position on the UAE military presence in Scotland <https://yemenhabab.net/news/35254>
- 22- These events were pivotal and a new point in the relationship between the coalition and the Yemeni government, where government forces and forces loyal to the UAE battled in the center of the southern city Aden. The forces loyal to the UAE besieged the legitimate government in Maasheq Palace.
- 23- A case study of the Abaad Center for Studies and Researches in March 2018 on the future of the Decisive Storm in its fourth year (Does the Gulf want to win over Iran, or does it have greed in Yemen?)
- 24- In Mahrah, Saudi Arabia sent special forces to control the airport the governorate, taking advantage of Oman’s concerns over the UAE presence