Regional Friction Over Yemen’s Socotra Island

OE Watch Commentary: The Saudi-UAE alliance in Yemen, frayed by squabbling between their Yemeni allies in Aden earlier this year, came under further strain in an unlikely place: the remote island of Socotra. On 5 May the UAE deployed troops and armored vehicles to Socotra, apparently in response to a surprise visit to the island by members of the Saudi-backed Yemeni government, which is recognized internationally but has only patchy control over sections of former South Yemen. In response, the Yemeni government reportedly filed an official complaint with the UN Security Council, accusing the UAE government of “unjustified military actions.” The accompanying excerpted articles highlight some of the regional dimensions to the tensions in Socotra.

Poking out of the Arabian Sea, near the entrance to the Gulf of Aden, the island of Socotra is in an important strategic location. Closer to the Horn of Africa’s tip than to the Yemeni mainland, the island has traditionally maintained a degree of autonomy from Yemen’s central government, whether it be in Sana’a or Aden. As noted in the first accompanying excerpt from the Qatari news website al-Araby al-Jadid, the UAE has become the island’s key player over the past two years. In addition to controlling its air and sea ports, the UAE has modernized Socotra’s infrastructure (including electricity, cellular network and health facilities) and bought up land for development projects. The article adds that the island’s new governor, appointed in March 2018 following the sudden death of his predecessor, is less welcoming of UAE influence in Socotra than were previous governors. As of mid-May, a high-level Saudi Arabian military delegation appears to have eased tensions between the Saudi-backed government and the UAE, at least regarding Socotra.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are to some degree following contradictory policies in Yemen. The 2015 Saudi-led military campaign’s stated goal was to restore the Yemeni government’s control over the capital Sana’a, following its takeover by the Huthi Movement and its supporters. According to the second accompanying excerpt, also from al-Araby al-Jadid, “Yemenis believed the coalition would intervene in a quick and decisive manner to restore legitimate government and allow it to exercise its duties on the ground. Instead, it has worked to drag out the war to the point of it becoming a burden and a disaster.” The author singles out the UAE as the main culprit for undermining Yemen's internationally recognized government, arguing that it has become an “actual adversary for the legitimate government” and has prevented it “from controlling the country’s ports, islands and coastlines from Socotra to al-Khukha.” This in turn has “strengthened the Huthis and weakened the legitimacy of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the exact opposite of the coalition’s stated goals.”

Some of the most strident criticism of the UAE’s role in Socotra has come from Qatari publications. From the UAE's perspective, this is no coincidence. The early May flare-up, according to the accompanying passage from the UAE daily al-Bayan, is “nothing new in terms of incitement by Qatar and its al-Jazeera channel.” Other key culprits, according to the article, include the Muslim Brotherhood and “a Turkish faction.” With this in mind, UAE actions in Yemen - and Socotra in particular – can be understood as strategic moves to counter the influence of the Turkey-Qatar-Muslim Brotherhood Axis, rather than actions aimed at helping Yemen's Saudi-backed government reclaim Sana’a from the Huthis and their allies. Turkish-UAE competition to project power in the Horn of Africa is on the uptick, with Turkey deepening economic and military links with the Mogadishu government, while the UAE does the same with the government of the breakaway, self-declared state of Somaliland. Although most countries were silent regarding recent events in Socotra, the Turkish Foreign Ministry issued a statement noting that it was concerned about and “closely following” the events, according to the statement, represent “a new threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Yemen.” End OE Watch Commentary (Winter)

Source:

The UAE wants to make up for its recent losses in Djibouti and Somalia, and all it has left is Yemen and specifically Socotra, a forward center from which to oversee the Red Sea. Abu Dhabi’s rulers may be thinking they can benefit from the destruction in Yemen to deepen it and snatch strategic Yemeni locations and bring them, whether officially or implicitly, under UAE sovereignty or at least influence… According to Yemeni sources, the UAE’s military actions express that country’s displeasure with [prime minister] bin Dagher’s visit to Socotra… and the popular reception he got there…

According to testimonies from Socotra to the Associated Press, the UAE is building factories and prisons on the island and recruiting its residents to form new militias. It is also buying land in order to build. The report cited a government official who said the UAE controlled all vital institutions on the island, including the airport and seaport, as well as the government headquarters, after establishing direct flights between Abu Dhabi and Socotra…

According to analysts, the escalation is also linked to threats to undermine the authority of Soctora’s new governor Ramzi Mahrous, who follows the 11 February popular revolution movement and who is known to oppose UAE activities on the island…

Most puzzling to those following the UAE’s military escalation in Socotra is the nebulous Saudi position toward what is happening, especially as what is occurring on the island is an extension of similar events that occurred in Aden, Shabwa, and other provinces… (continued)
Continued: Regional Friction Over Yemen’s Socotra Island

“...We are closely following the recent developments in Yemen’s Socotra Island...”
- Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs

After 3 years of war, the balance on the ground shows that the intervention in Yemen of the Saudi-led Arab Coalition has strengthened the Huthis and weakened the legitimacy of President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, the exact opposite of the coalition’s stated goals. This also appears to have taken place due to deliberate policies, rather than coincidence... Yemenis believed the coalition would intervene in a quick and decisive manner to restore legitimate government and allow it to exercise its duties on the ground. Instead, it has worked to drag out the war to the point of it becoming a burden and a disaster... why doesn’t [the government] carry out its executive duties on the ground, such as security, education, health and other basic services provided by any leadership? Simply put, they are not allowed to by the coalition, which does not want legitimate government to return and extend its writ on a territory under its control and not Huthi control. That is to say, the coalition has become the actual adversary for the legitimate government and its presence, specifically the UAE, which has prevented the government from controlling the country’s ports, islands and coastlines from Socotra to al-Khukha.

Source:

The campaigns that seek to mislead regarding the UAE’s stance in Yemen are nothing but a continuation of Qatari-Iranian-Muslim Brotherhood conspiracies... regarding Socotra, there is nothing new in terms of incitement by Qatar and its al-Jazeera channel... al-Jazeera, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Muslim Brotherhood author Tawakul Karman, and a Turkish faction are behind what is happening in Socotra...

Source:

We are closely following the recent developments in Yemen’s Socotra Island. We are concerned about these developments that pose a new threat to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Yemen.

Source:

Dragon Blood Tree, Socotra Island.
Source: By Rod Waddington from Kergunyah, Australia, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dragon_Blood_Tree,_Socotra_Island_(10098980413).jpg