

# Yemen's Socotra ...

## War of Influence in the Indian Ocean



Geopolitics

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## Introduction<sup>[1]</sup>

Since the UAE has arrived on the governorate of Socotra Archipelago<sup>[2]</sup> in 2016, it put most of its efforts to control the strategic Yemeni island that is close to the strategic Bab al-Mandab strait, near the Horn of Africa, and represents the meeting point of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea.

The archipelago consists of six other islands and seven rocky islands<sup>[3]</sup>. Its fame dates back to the Stone Age and flourishing trade of sacred goods, and the activity on the old trade route - the frankincense road. The control on the island provides influence on the international shipping line and a great impact on the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal.

The UAE intervened in Yemen as part of the Saudi-led Arab coalition to confront the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in March 2015, but soon it began to send its forces to the Socotra Archipelago at the beginning of 2016, utilizing the population's need for rescue from hurricanes that struck the island.<sup>[4]</sup>

Socotra did not witness an armed conflict in modern history, so the events of June 2020 and the bombing of the capital of the archipelago "Hadibo" with artillery and Katyusha rockets by the forces of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council changed the situation on the island. The military vehicles and armored vehicles invaded the state's institutions in Hadiboh one day after the government forces fought against the UAE-backed forces to open a new chapter in the Yemeni government camp and its allies, while the Houthis continue to try to make progress toward the eastern Marib governorate.



Socotra did not witness an armed conflict in modern history, so the events of June 2020 and the bombing of the capital of the island, Hadibo, with artillery and Katyusha rockets by the forces of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council was unprecedented occurrence

## Sequence of events:

Socotra has remained out of direct military escalation since the Southern Transitional Council seized the temporary capital, Aden, in August 2019. Also, the archipelago was not mentioned in the Riyadh agreement signed by the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council in November 2019 – while all the southern governorates mentioned. The agreement based on the involvement of the Southern Transitional Council in the government after the incorporation of its militias in the state army (at least a thousand fighters).

However, during that period, the UAE continued to cause splits within the security and military institutions for the interest of the Southern Transitional Council, including the first brigade, Marine Corps. Few of the forces that remained loyal to the government were committed to orders of Socotra Governor Ramzi Mahrous and Director of Security Colonel Faiz al-Shathi, but during the events of June 2020, these forces fought for only 24 hours. What happened?!

- A day before the Hadibo events (June 19, 2020), the local authority met with commander of the Saudi Duty Forces, Brigadier Abdul Rahman al-Hajji stationed in Hadibu, to reduce the escalation in the governorate, during which the Southern Transitional Council would withdraw from the entrances to Hadibu and the government forces stop targeting the STC forces. The Yemeni government agreed and withdrew from newly developed positions, but the forces of the Southern Transitional Council replaced them according to the desire of the Saudi forces, who withdrew from their positions.
- The local authority communicated with the Saudi forces before the Southern Transitional Council forces entered Hadibo, but the commander of the Saudi forces refused to respond, and the deputy commander of the Saudi forces was contacted but he said that "the matter is beyond their control and Saudi Arabia cannot deter the progress made by the Southern Transitional Council."<sup>[5]</sup> All Saudi military units withdrew, and the Transitional Council managed to control the main police headquarters in Hadibo, which locates in front of the coalition forces headquarters in the city. The Saudi forces were outside the building to guard it.

- The Southern Transitional Council announced the annexation of Socotra Archipelago to the "self-rule" that was announced in April 2020 in the southern governorates.
- • Governor Ramzi Mahrous, tribal sheikhs, and local officials managed to get out of Socotra and move to Al-Mahra Governorate on the Yemeni coast, where al-Mahra and Socotra tribes are linked with historical roots.
- • The UAE did not provide any justification for the progress of its allies on Socotra Island, but a report of the official Emirates News Agency on June 28 said that the UAE is carrying out development in Socotra and made a major change in it by supporting humanitarian projects.<sup>[6]</sup> Emirati charitable projects on the island are seen as a cover to control the Yemeni archipelago and build a network of influence to protect Emirati goals and show that Abu Dhabi's presence on the island is a popular demand.
- • Saudi Arabia has built a committee to restore the situation in the archipelago to normal. This committee works outside the Riyadh agreement between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council. Government officials believe that Saudi Arabia has facilitated the accession of the Southern Transitional Council to the Governorate of Socotra in order to pressure the Yemeni President to accept new proposals on the Riyadh agreement that stipulates the formation of a new government and then implementing the security and military file, which was rejected by President AbdRabbo Mansour Hadi.<sup>[7]</sup>
- • By the end of June 2020, the governor, Ramzi Mahrous, arrived in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, to discuss the control of the southern-backed southern transitional council over the archipelago, and work with the committee - formed by Saudi Arabia - to restore conditions to before the transitional council took control of Socotra. However, the efforts of this committee faltered until early July 2020 - at the time of writing the paper - and did not return to Socotra Archipelago as planned.

Later, early in July, Faiz Al-Shathi, Director of Socotra Security and Brigadier Ali Salmin, Commander of the First Brigade, Saad Salem, commander of the Coastal Defense Forces, Amjad Thani, Director General of Hadibo District, Colonel Noah Adham, commander of the island's military police were summoned to Riyadh. All of them belong to the legitimate government and have been residing at the coalition headquarters in Hadibo since the transitional council took control of the city. Leaders of the Southern Transitional Council refused to travel to Riyadh with government officials without providing convincing reasons.<sup>[8]</sup>

- The control of the Southern Transitional Council over the Socotra Archipelago came at a time when indirect negotiations in Riyadh between the STC and the legitimate government were ongoing in order to implement the Riyadh Agreement. The consultations reached a dead end due to the legitimate government's refusal to implement the political file of the agreement before the military and security file.

### **Increase in number of international actors:**

Socotra, as a World Heritage Site, according to a classification in 2008, is facing scraping of its nature that may reflect on the identity and heritage of the island. In addition to building innovations, there are turbulent climate factors that affected the archipelago and damaged its unique environment.

The dragon blood tree may become one of the myths one day. If the bulldozers persist, it will lead to extinction of this tree and rare plants, birds and animals.

The fall of Socotra from the hand of the legitimacy is the third coup in Yemen after the fall of the temporary capital, Aden, in August 2019, by the UAE-backed transitional council forces, and the fall of Sana'a in the hands of the Houthis in September 2014. But the fall of Socotra is different as it is an indication of a long-term fragmentation and chaos in all over Yemen, including those areas that did not enter the war. The latest events are not related to the declared war that the coalition is running against the Houthis,

but rather to broader regional goals related to military competition on the international shipping line and the race to build military bases near the Bab al-Mandab strait and on the other bank of the Horn of Africa.

The Bab al-Mandab region and the Gulf of Aden are the catalysts that make countries look for a foothold in the six-year-old Yemeni crisis.



Control of Socotra is not related to the declared war that the coalition is conducting against the Houthis, but rather to broader regional goals related to military competition on the international shipping routes, and to strategic interests and a race for influence

- **Emirates:** Abu Dhabi ambitions to be widely present in southern Yemen, so Socotra represents the main link in the UAE's military and economic ambition, as it considers it the center of its influence in the Gulf and the Horn of Africa. It started early to reach the strategic island. In February 2016, Khalid Bahah, the Prime Minister and the Vice President - at that time - held a press conference on the island alongside the Emirates Red Crescent, announcing the signing of contracts with the Emirati entity for the reconstruction of Socotra. About 40 days after this press conference, Bahah was removed from his post. This dismissal was the reason for the strained relations between Abu Dhabi and President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. In May 2018, with the escalation of crisis over the island between the Emirates and the Yemeni government, Khalid Bahah denied that he had leased the island to the UAE for a period of 99 years. A month before signing the agreement with the Emirati Red Crescent, the Minister of Tourism - then - Muammar Al-Iryani spoke of the government's desire to find a tourism company for Socotra in cooperation with businessmen from the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the UAE unusually celebrated these statements.<sup>[9]</sup>

In May 2018, the UAE sent military reinforcements to the island to challenge the Yemeni government. The issue was escalated at that time and reached the UN Security Council after a letter from the legitimate government, which prompted Saudi Arabia to have its forces on the island, which are still stationed until today.<sup>[10]</sup>

- **Saudi Arabia:** Riyadh is fighting on more than one domestic and international front in Yemen. But its situation in Socotra was, at the beginning, to bridge the rift between the Yemeni government and the UAE, and then it became clear that its presence in Socotra has become a strategic goal to protect its interests near the Bab al-Mandab strait and in Al-Mahra, where it plans for a long-term stay by building an oil port in the province that locates on the Omani border to avoid the passage of oil through the vital Strait of Hormuz which Iran - the kingdom's traditional enemy - threatens to close, if tension increases in the Persian Gulf.<sup>[11]</sup> The control of Socotra would not have taken place, if the Saudi decision-maker did not consider achieving strategic interests through the Riyadh Agreement.
- **Sultanate of Oman:** “Socotra and al-Mahra” and the intertwining of tribes with the Sultanate of Oman represent a milestone in Muscat’s relationship with the two Yemeni governorates, and the nature of the Saudi presence in al-Mahra and Saudi Emirati in the Socotra Archipelago raises the alarm to the Omanis, who believe that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are seeking to create instability in the sultanate through Yemeni territories, to gain influence within Omani territory or practice pressure over border disputes between the two countries. In February 2020, a new phase in the history of Oman began with the arrival of a new Sultan to the leadership of the country, and Socotra's departure from the legitimate government increases tension between the UAE and Saudi Arabia on one hand, and the Sultanate of Oman on the other hand in light of an already tense relationship in the Gulf due to the ongoing rift with Qatar, and the crisis of UAE spies in Oman. Therefore, the Sultanate of Oman may be motivated to intervene in the Yemeni crisis in a way that does not guarantee the long-term remaining of Saudi and Emirati on its western borders.

- **Iran:** Tehran, which supports the Houthis, is taking advantage of the UAE's control on Socotra to confirm its previous view that Saudi Arabia and the UAE aim to "occupy Yemen" and influence the international shipping lane that is linked to "Bab al-Mandab". It is also seeking through the European-Iranian Committee to discuss the Yemen file to prove the erosion of the legitimate government in Yemen and that the Saudis and Emiratis are the ones who are fighting Yemenis in their country, in what Tehran describes as "aggression" against a sovereign state. Since early, Iran has supported calls for secession in southern Yemen, including those who supported the President of the Southern Transitional Council, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, and other armed movements affiliated with the Southern Movement during the period (2007-2015). Therefore, controlling Socotra by the transitional council and increasing disintegration in the southern governorates increases their long-term chances in the future of southern Yemen.
- **Russia:** With regard to Russian geopolitical concerns, Yemen is an indispensable component of the Kremlin's growing ambitions throughout the coastal region across the Red Sea. Returning to Socotra, Russia may be able to establish a separate naval base in Sudan, as discussed between former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and the Russian President in 2017. This will strengthen Russia's influence not only in the Gulf of Aden but in the entire Red Sea region. In conjunction with Moscow's efforts to generate energy in the eastern part of the Mediterranean, it will be able to expand its control largely in the Red Sea as well as increase the Russian operational capabilities in the Indian Ocean.<sup>[12]</sup>
- **The United States:** The United States seeks to stop the Russian expansion in the region, so it may look for a foothold in Socotra or prevent the island from becoming a new focus of regional conflict.

- **China:** China has extensive economic ambitions through the "Silk Road", on which the Arabian Sea represents one of the important points. Socotra represents an important connection point between the Indian Ocean and the Arab Sea. In April 2019, China signed an agreement with the Yemeni government to join the "Silk Road."<sup>[13]</sup> In the summer of 2017, China opened its first military base outside its borders in Djibouti (opposite to the Bab al-Mandab from the African side) to use it for supplying naval ships that participate in peacekeeping and relief missions off the coast of Somalia and Yemen. After the arrival of President Hadi to the power, the Yemeni government had terminated the contract with "DP World", in 2013, to manage the Aden Port - one of the reasons that made the UAE angry with the Yemeni government - after the DP World deliberately weakened the activity of the Aden port. In mid-November 2013, an agreement between the "Gulf of Aden Ports Corporation" and the "Chinese Ports Engineering Company Limited" was signed to expand and deepen the Aden Containers Terminal. The agreement was suspended due to the current war.
- **Israel:** Early in 2020, lines of communication arose between the Southern Transitional Council and the Israeli occupation and meetings were held between leaders of the council and the Israeli government officials. The two sides did not disclose details of their discussions, but an Israeli news agency described the "Southern Transitional Council" as a new "Tel Aviv" friend in Yemen. The agency talked about consultations between the two parties and pointed out that a friendly country had begun to take shape in southern Yemen,<sup>[14]</sup> although it is still a long way off. Amid the growing normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE, it is not surprising that a relationship was established between Israel and the Southern Transitional Council, supported by Abu Dhabi. The meetings were conducted under the auspices of Emirati officials. The Israelis will consider this friendship a good opportunity to be present near the Bab al-Mandab strait, as this was a long way off for the Israelis.

Securing the southern port of Eilat and getting a shipping lane that grants access not only to the Suez Canal but also to the Red Sea and through the Bab al-Mandab to the Indian Ocean and beyond is of vital importance to Tel Aviv, as a gateway to the Far East and China which is already a major trading partner.

Wars with Arab neighbors in 1956, 1967 and 1973, resulted in the obstruction of Israeli navigation. In the last war, Yemen closed the Bab al-Mandab strait and surrounded the Red Sea. Since then, Israel has considered any attempt to prevent the use of the Red Sea as a war action.<sup>[15]</sup> Therefore, any Israeli presence in Socotra is a goal that it seeks to achieve to protect its shipping lines from any new war with the Arabs, in addition to fear of an Iranian domination through the armed Houthi group or any other force on the Bab al-Mandab strait.

- **Turkey:** Turkey has an advanced military base in Somalia on the opposite side of the Bab al-Mandab strait, but the constant talk, during Socotra's crisis, of Turkish attempt to be present on the island is much exaggerated, at least for the time being. This misleading information aims to push Saudi Arabia to continue to support the STC's coup in the important Yemeni archipelago.

Emirati media close to Saudi authorities have been moving forward in a highly coordinated propaganda to justify the coup in Socotra, spreading misleading media reports about the size of the Turkish presence in the Yemeni politics<sup>[16]</sup> through several ways:

- First: the Southern Transitional Council faces a "Qatar-Turkey-Muslim Brotherhood / Islah" plan to control the archipelago.
- Second: Turkey wants to control Socotra to increase its influence in the Horn of Africa. A misleading picture of Syrian fighters was published as Turkish security experts, who were assisting the Yemeni security forces and army in the archipelago.
- Third: Turkey, Qatar, the Brotherhood, Iran and Houthis are cooperating to confront Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and are planning to take Socotra as their base.

Turkey is involved in Yemen but through soft power, not an armed military force, as in northern Syria or Libya. It relies on food assistance and it has hosted Yemeni media outlets opposing to the coalition and the Houthis.

Despite the deep disagreement with the United Arab Emirates, Turkey does not see any necessity to have hostility with Saudi Arabia and it does not place Saudi in the same category of hostility as to Abu Dhabi for reasons related to the role of Saudi Arabia and its position in the Middle East. The same is true for Riyadh, which does not see that hostility against Ankara as a necessity at the present time in light of the continuing tension with Iran. It is possible to look at the volume of trade exchange between Riyadh and Ankara during the past years to realize that the trade exchange should continue at the same level, while the figures of trade exchange between the UAE and Turkey are low. <sup>[17]</sup>

- **Countries of the Horn of Africa:** Since all countries are searching for a long stay in the Bab al-Mandab and the Gulf of Aden, the countries of the Horn of Africa are already affected by the increasing conflict on Socotra and the Yemeni coasts. Most of this intervention is not only related to the interests of countries near the Strait of Bab al-Mandab and the corridor of world trade, but it is also related to the conflict of influence in the Horn of Africa. Russia does not have a presence in the Horn of Africa, compared to the Emirates, China, the United States, Japan, Turkey and other countries. Saudi Arabia plans to build a military base in Djibouti, so the endeavor of its presence in Yemen is one of the options of its presence also in Africa. Some analysts believe that the Horn of Africa region will be a place of conflict in the near future. Therefore, the resort of some countries to be present in Yemen is related to their ambitions and interests in the Horn of Africa, which may push other countries, including African ones, to intervene as well. This factor causes an international competition on the Yemeni lands.

## The Repercussions of the Coup in Socotra:

It is not expected that the Southern Transitional Council will retract the declaration of self-rule that it announced in April 2020, even if the Riyadh agreement is implemented, as chairman of the Self-rule Committee Ahmed bin Brik points out: “We will not retract the decision of self-rule, and the council’s directions in this regard are effective, and we do not accept bargaining or bartering in agreements for political solutions, especially the Riyadh agreement (...) a group of corrupts and haters are calling for the cancelation of the self-rule in exchange for implementing the Riyadh agreement.”<sup>[18]</sup> It is a confirmation on the STC’s refusal to cancel the declaration of emergency and self-rule of southern governorates in exchange for implementing the Riyadh Agreement

After the control of Socotra Archipelago, a demonstration of supporters of the Southern Transitional Council took place in the city of Mukalla, the capital of Hadramout, the largest Yemeni governorate, to demand a self-rule "to enable the governorate to manage its resources."<sup>[19]</sup> Hadramout, which is managed by Faraj Al-Bahsani, who is also the leader of the second Military Region and supported by the Emirates, is not in harmony with the government. He has a good relationship with the Southern Transitional Council, but he does not support their actions. The authorities in Hadramaut are seeking autonomy for the governorate, whether in a southern state or within a federal Yemeni state.<sup>[20]</sup>

A document says that al-Bahsani asked President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi to force the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to apologize to the “Hadrami Elite” force, the UAE paramilitary force, which is part of the force of the Second Military Region, after Foreign Minister Mohammed al-Hadrami described it as a “militia.”<sup>[21]</sup>

The scene was repeated in Shabwa governorate, which contains an important oil port and the liquefied gas export center and oil refinery, under the authority of the legitimate government. The STC’s supporters went out to demand "self-rule" in the province and the return of the paramilitary forces, supported by the UAE to the province.<sup>[22]</sup> It was also repeated in al-Mahra, which is under the control of the legitimate government and Saudi forces, as the Southern Transitional Council threatened to impose "self-rule" and "the formation of the al-Mahra elite forces."<sup>[23]</sup>

Also, the Southern Transitional Council's control of the Central Bank of Yemen funds to obtain financing for their own authority may be repeated in other governorates. In June 2020, the STC's militants confiscated "64 billion Yemeni riyals (approximately \$ 256 million)", which were printed in Russia. The amount was owned by the central bank in Aden.<sup>[24]</sup> In the same month, they diverted the path of five trucks loaded with the central bank's funds to a UAE camp in the city of Mukalla.<sup>[25]</sup> The Transitional Council recognized that its fighters confiscated the money "to combat corruption!"

The escalation of the Southern Transitional Council and its attempts to impose the option of "self-rule" in the southern provinces under its control, may prompt a regional conflict, similar to the bloody events in January 1986, or at least encourages other regional or political currents to adopt a similar declaration that further disintegrates the country.

This situation may include, not only the southern provinces that reject the Southern Transitional Council, but even the northern provinces, as it may prompt any paramilitary "force" to impose its control on a geographical scale in order to obtain political gains. After the transitional council took control of Socotra, the so-called Guards of the Republic forces, led by Tariq Saleh, nephew of former Yemeni president Ali Saleh, in the western coast of Yemen, tries to impose his control on the al-Hujaria region, which includes several districts in southern Taiz, in order to declare himself as an effective ruler in southern Taiz.<sup>[26]</sup>

## **The objectives of the coalition in toppling Socotra:**

The control of Socotra Archipelago by the Southern Transitional Council is a turning point in the Yemeni war, which started after the Houthis took control of the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014 and since the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in March 2015, especially in areas supposed to be under the control of the legitimate government. Recent moves in the southern governorates, including the control of Socotra Archipelago,

aim to show that the legitimate government is the weakest party in the power equation. The Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, cannot be cleared of the continuing chaos in southern Yemen.

**The coalition has blatantly shifted from its primary goal of restoring the legitimate government in Yemen to focusing on three priorities:**

- Building parallel authorities to the legitimate government in areas under its control.
- Deliberately undermining the legitimate government, which would weaken the legitimacy of the coalition's intervention in Yemen.
- Controlling the ports, coasts and islands, according to the map of the Saudi-Emirati military presence.

**Also, this shift indicates that Riyadh may want to invest Socotra file to pass some of its immediate goals to control the general situation before getting out from the quagmire of the Yemen war:**

- **Pressure on legitimacy:** Saudi Arabia believes that the STC's control over the Socotra island may pressure President Hadi to accept the implementation of the political file before the security and military file in the Riyadh agreement, and that the Socotra coup gives Saudi a larger margin to interfere in the legitimacy such as forming a government Dialogue with the Houthis and preventing escalation steps against its ally, the UAE.
- **A gift to encourage the transitional council:** With the announcement of the self-rule in the governorate of Socotra, the transitional council would have been encouraged to exit from the state of confinement between al-Dhale and Yafe to control other southern governorates, including Hadramout, Abyan, Shabwa, al-Mahra which reject the STC's "self-rule". An official statement from Lahj, although it is under the administration of the Transitional Council, rejected the "self-rule". In exchange for this precious gift from the coalition may be the subjugation of the STC's leaders to Riyadh.

- **A new role for the Emirates:** Socotra was taken from the hands of the legitimate government to the hands of the Transitional Council encouraged Abu Dhabi to prepare itself for any new role in Yemen as long as it feels that it controls on the important islands and ports. Thus, the UAE declaration of its withdrawal from the Yemen war is useless because in reality it is still involved in the war through its field presence to support its allies. The Emirati presence in Socotra may reduce its rush to Iran and give it a role in confronting Turkey, as Socotra is the closet area to Somalia where Ankara is present and has a military base.
- **Prolonging the war:** Giving Socotra to the transitional council will make the implementation of the Riyadh agreement even more difficult and will obstruct any peace agreement with the Houthis. The statement of the Southern Transitional Council after controlling Socotra explains this dimension, as it talked about "the sovereignty of the southern forces over all southern territories" and rejected any political solutions imposed on the transitional council "to withdraw its forces from the governorate of Abyan."<sup>[27]</sup> The failure to implement the Riyadh agreement makes the war in Yemen continue and reduces embarrassment and pressure on Saudi Arabia before the international community, which calls for ending the war and a peace agreement with the Houthis, while Houthi missiles and drones are being launched at Saudi cities.

## Complications of the Riyadh Agreement:

After the southern transitional council took control of Socotra, the Saudi-led Arab coalition announced a ceasefire between the legitimate government and the transitional council in southern Yemen and began consultations to implement the Riyadh agreement. The leader of the transitional council, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, has been in Riyadh for weeks, but little progress has been made towards indirect consultations between the two parties.

**The Riyadh agreement goes towards rearranging priorities, from the political file to the military-security file, after Saudi pressure and guarantees of implementation:**

\* **Self-administration:** The Southern Transitional Council is not expected to cancel the declaration of self-administration that allows it to govern southern provinces as a parallel authority to the legitimate government. The abolition of "self-administration" apparently has become a condition for the government before the formation of a new government that will include the Southern Transitional Council. Therefore, it has become clear that the cancellation of all impacts that may later affect the Riyadh agreement has become a condition for implementing the agreement.

- **The ceasefire:** Although the coalition announced a ceasefire, clashes and ambushes continued during the period following the announcement. It is ruled out that confrontations will stop even if a new government is announced, as the forces are still on the ground in a state of alert.

\***Legitimacy Erosion:** The implementation of the Riyadh agreement goes towards forcing the legitimate government to make a concession, despite the continued escalation by the Southern Transitional Council in Socotra and Abyan, and demonstrations being organized by the Southern Transitional Council demanding the control of the rest of the southern governorates, in a further diminution of the legitimacy that is already eroded by its regional allies.



The imposition of the "self-administration" by the Southern Transitional Council in the governorates under its control may prompt a regional conflict similar to the old bloody conflict in January 1986 events or at least may encourage other regional or political currents to make a similar declaration that further disintegrates the country

## UN opportunity in a new initiative:

After the Socotra events, the UN Secretary-General's envoy, Martin Griffiths, presented a "joint declaration" initiative between the Houthis and the Yemeni government that includes:

- A cease-fire, immediately after the signing of the joint declaration by the two parties (the government and the Houthis), with a complete cessation of military offensive operations, land, sea and air, and a halt to the redeployment of heavy and medium weapons.
- The immediate cessation of all land, sea and air military operations against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the implementation of the provisions of the ceasefire within 72 hours of signing the agreement, and the parties should facilitate the passage of international shipping.
- "Establishing a joint monitoring mechanism through a military coordination committee to be chaired by the United Nations and high-level military representatives from both sides."
- Ensuring the protection of civilians and civilian facilities, cooperating with the United Nations to implement this agreement, and starting an immediate agreement a ceasefire mechanism. The mechanism shall include several key elements, including the holding of weekly meetings of the committee and when required, and establishing a hot line of communication between the two parties around the clock and reporting violation to the United Nations.
- The joint declaration sets the stage for the resumption of political consultations. The political consultations must be resumed with the consent of both parties, as soon as possible, under a Yemeni leadership and the auspices of the United Nations, to reach a comprehensive peace agreement to end the war.
- The joint declaration dealt with the maritime security through "guaranteeing the safety of the Safer oil tanker, and allowing immediate technical assessments of the tanker under the supervision of the United Nations, and making necessary initial maintenance to ensure the safety of unloading oil from the tanker to sell it and use revenues to pay the salaries of the state employees."

-Lifting restrictions on the entry of commercial ships carrying gas, oil derivatives and goods on a regular basis without delay, as long as they are committed to the arms embargo imposed by Security Council resolutions.

- The necessity of "opening the Sana'a airport for international commercial, humanitarian and civil flights, similar to the other Yemeni airports, and setting an agreed cooperation mechanism for the operational procedures in Sanaa International Airport."

The Yemeni government rejected the draft and said it "violates policy and goes beyond Griffiths' mission",<sup>[28]</sup> and the Houthis have not commented on it. The draft unambiguously introduces the Houthis' perceptions and deals with the legitimate government as the weakest party, as it only controls nominally the liberated southern provinces, and suffers from problems with its allies in Socotra. Usually, the United Nations exploits the balance of power on the ground to present its initiatives, but the latest initiative ignores the character of the legitimate government, as it is internationally recognized, and the Parliament and the presidency are elected by all Yemenis.

## **The Houthis and disintegration of the legitimacy camp:**

For the Houthi group, the disputes and intensification of a battle within the government-coalition camp increase its ability to fix its presence in areas of its control - even though imposing control by force. The Saudi desire to use the Socotra events to impose the political part before the military and security part of the Riyadh agreement makes the Houthis more confident that their plans to keep the weapons and their armed group will succeed. As the "Riyadh Agreement" provides a clear picture of what can be achieved in the comprehensive peace agreement.

In the Yemeni consultations in Kuwait between the Yemeni government and the Houthis in 2016, the main dispute between the two parties was whichever should be implemented first, the political side or the military side. The government insisted on handing over the weapons before starting the formation of a new government, but this was rejected by the Houthis.

The Houthis took advantage of the paradoxical situation inside the camp of their opponents after the events of Socotra to escape the responsibility of the Safer oil tank that is under their control. The local and international tension continues about the effects that could be caused by an explosion or oil leakage from the Safer floating oil tank off the Yemeni port of Ras Issa in the Red Sea, as 1.1 million barrels of oil is expected to leak to causing the largest environmental disaster in the Red Sea in its history.

The argument about the floating tank maintenance appeared in the recent United Nations initiative. After the Houthis refusal to allow a UN team to access to the tank, the issue should be solved under the Chapter Seven of the Security Council resolution and the Houthis should be forced to stop dealing with the issue of Safer as a hostage of war. The floating tank is supposed to be repaired - in any form - without resorting to agreements between the Yemeni government and to an agreement with the Houthis directly because it is an issue that affects the international peace and security.

Recently, the United Nations said that the Houthis allowed a team of the United Nations to visit the floating tank to repair it, but that comes days before holding a special session by the UN Security Council on the issue in July 15, 2020. The Houthis have consistently taken a step back before the session, but that does not mean that they really agreed to allow the Safer maintenance. The coming days may suggest the extent of the Houthis' credibility in this regard.

## **The future of Socotra crisis:**

Although tensions have been escalated after the Southern Transitional Council formally controlled the city of Aden, parts of Abyan, and all of Lahj and al-Dhale, Socotra remained outside the agreement. This may make the situation of the island turn into a bargaining chip to pressure on the legitimate government in the future.

The indirect consultations between the legitimate government and the Southern Transitional Council, sponsored by Riyadh, have failed to achieve any progress in the Riyadh agreement's files. However, there are indications of partially progress that occurred after the southern transitional council, with support from the UAE, apparently with Saudi desire, controlled the Socotra archipelago. However, the Socotra issue is still far from the "Riyadh agreement" or just an addition in the agreement,

although the success in returning the conditions back to their previous times on the island, even if formally, means achieving a big progress in the Riyadh agreement. Yemeni President AbdRabbo Mansour Hadi met with his deputy, advisers, the government officials and the Parliament's leadership in order to come up with a vision to implement the Riyadh agreement at the request of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Yemeni president has repeatedly refused to solve the political part before the military part in the Riyadh agreement and continued his determination to delay the political part [the formation of a new government equally between north and south] until after merging the UAE-backed paramilitary forces into the Yemeni army and security forces.

All the legitimate government institutions would not have been summoned to Riyadh, if the Yemeni president continued to stick to his refusal to form a new government before the weapons of the transitional council were withdrawn and the Emirati paramilitary forces were merged into the army. Therefore, it seems that a new government will be formed in return for Saudi guarantees to implement the withdrawal of weapons and the integration.

At the same time, Riyadh will not be able to make progress in the agreement, even after Hadi's approval, only after a change is made in Socotra. Riyadh formed a committee of Saudi officials, government representatives, and other representatives of the Southern Transitional Council to return the situation on the island to before the coup, but the committee did not make any progress in this regard. It seems that Abu Dhabi is pushing Saudis to keep the situation as it is.

**This conflict between the implementation of the Riyadh agreement that did not include the Socotra archipelago, and how to solve the problem of the transitional council's control, supported by the Emirates, on the island of Socotra, suggests several scenarios:**

**The first scenario:** making a new supplement in the Riyadh agreement that calls for the normalization of the situation on the Socotra archipelago, which is an expected scenario, but its difficulties are many,

as the time factor and the length of the discussions may make the agreement fails, with the possibility of expanding confrontations between the legitimate government and the transitional council to include the governorates of Hadramaut, Mahra and Shabwa.

**The second scenario:** Restoring conditions in Socotra through an independent committee before the implementation of the Riyadh agreement. This may be approved by the government and refused by the transitional council, except in the event that the council gets new incentives to give up its control of Socotra, which does not require any agreements on it. The incentives that the transitional wants may weaken President Hadi's legitimacy, which makes it difficult for this scenario to happen.

**The third scenario:** the implementation of the Riyadh agreement with Saudi guarantees to solve the problem of the Socotra archipelago later after the formation of the new government. This gives the UAE an opportunity to be able to gain more military control over the strategic archipelago. The legitimate government may reject it, unless the appointment of a new leadership for the Socotra is delayed, which maybe rejected by Abu Dhabi-backed transitional council.



Three difficult scenarios await the Riyadh agreement after the Emirati-backed transitional council controlled on Socotra Archipelago. Either a new attachment will be added to the agreement or the conditions in Socotra will return to normal before any agreement or the agreement will be implemented with Saudi guarantees to solve the island's issue after that

## Margins:

[1] The Abaad Center for Studies and Research often has to withhold the identity of researchers to protect them as they are present in dangerous areas or threatened by one of the parties to the conflict - more than one researcher participated in writing this study.

[2] Socotra is the largest part of the archipelago that consists of 6 islands, and occupies a strategic location in the Indian Ocean off the coast of the Horn of Africa, near the Gulf of Aden. The intensity of the conflict in Socotra - which is one of the southern governorates - escalated after the announcement of the self-administration by the Southern Transitional Council on April 26, 2020, and the state of public emergency amid Arab and international rejection.

[3] Socotra, and five other islands are Darsa, Samha, Abd al-Kuri, Saial Abd al-Kuri and Silal Socotra, and seven rocky islands are Sira, Wardadah, Adlah, Karshah, Suhair, Dhaen Zil, and Jals.

[4] Two hurricanes, "Mig", "Chabla", struck Socotra in one month (November 2015), causing a natural disaster that killed a number of the island's residents, bulldozed agriculture and destroyed infrastructure, including fishermen's boats.

[5] A coalition official told the Abaad Center researcher that the president rejected a Saudi offer to recruit 300 southern soldiers for Socotra in order to prevent the transitional from controlling and neutralize pro-legal forces.

[6] UAE aid helps Socotra development

<https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302851854>

[7] Three government officials spoke on the night of taking control of the Socotra Archipelago, June 19, 2020, for the Abaad Center for Studies and Research.

[8] A local authority official, still in Hadiboh, spoke to the Abaad Center for Studies and Research on July 6, 2020. An official source in the Southern Transitional Council talked on the same day to the Abaad Center that they would not move to Riyadh except with guarantees of appointing a new governor from the Transitional Council in Socotra and that the self-administration will remain as a supervisor of the local authority.

[9] Yemeni Socotra.. Under Emirati Occupation - Abaad Center for Studies and Research, May 2018

<https://abaadstudies.org/news.php?id=59768>

[10] Previous reference

[11] Does the Gulf want to win war against Iran, or does it have ambitions in Yemen ?, Abaad Center for Studies and Research April 2018

<https://abaadstudies.org/pdf-11.pdf>

[12] Russia's Return to Yemen - Abaad Center for Studies and Research (March 2020) <https://abaadstudies.org/news-59834.html>

[13] In order to join the "Silk Road" ... Yemen signs an agreement with China <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/world/201904251040711385-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%86/>

[14] Israel's New "Secret" Friend in Yemen <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/israels-new-secret-friend-in-yemen/>

[15] [15] Israel's ambitions in south Yemen increase risk of conflict with Houthis – Middle East Monitor <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200629-israels-ambitions-in-south-yemen-increase-risk-of-conflict-with-houthis/>

[16] An analysis can be found, Ali Bakir, who clarifies the "Emirati propaganda war" in Socotra and an attempt to drag Turkey to it so as not to be blamed.

How the UAE is using fake news to create a Turkish role in Yemen

<https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/how-the-uae-is-using-fake-news-to-manufacture-a-turkish-role-in-yemen-38006>

[17] Turkey, the Gulf, and Libya: The economic impact of a growing geopolitical divide, 17 Jun 2020

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-gulf-and-libya-economic-impact-growing-geopolitical-divide>

[18] Major General Bin Brik: Self-administration is not a barter for implementing the Riyadh agreement <https://www.alayyam.info/news/89D1Y79P-E2NWD4-772C#.XwO6I2vXMfA.twitter>

[19] A mass protest in Mukalla to demand self-administration for Hadramout affairs <https://stcaden.com/news/12201>

[20] An interview with a local official in Hadhramaut Governorate by phone, with the "Abaad Center for Studies and Research" in April 2020.

[21] The document was issued in July 2020

[22] Shabwa revolts in support of self-administration and demand the expulsion of Muslim Brotherhood militias from the governorate [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8b4v\\_uhcjE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P8b4v_uhcjE)

[23] Head of the STC in Al-Mahra threatens to escalate demands for self-administration and the formation of a "micro-elite" <http://www.aljanoobalyoum.net/32183/>

The people of Al-Mahra Governorate, Qashn District, say yes to the application of the Southern Self-administration, the Southern Transitional Council.

Mass crowd event in Mahra in support of the Southern Transitional Council <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvhGsbyud08>

[24] Separatists in south Yemen seize convoy with billions of riyals for central bank <https://in.reuters.com/article/yemen-security-cenbank/separatists-in-south-yemen-seize-convoy-with-billions-of-riyals-for-central-bank-idINKBN23L0EU>

[25] Yemeni official accuses the UAE of seizing state funds in Hadramout <https://bit.ly/3gzxUaE>

[26] "Tariq Saleh" leads the joint forces consisting of several factions (the guards of the Republic, Salafi factions, and the Tehami resistance) and his forces include more than 40 thousand fighters in addition to more than 5,000 fighters from his allies, the Abu Al-Abbas Brigades, backed by the UAE - whose president is listed on the terrorist lists due to his affiliation with Al Qaeda. More details:

(Individual) "Tariq Saleh" is preparing to declare a UAE authority on the western coast of Yemen

<https://theyemen.net/%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%B5%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%8-4%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%A7>

[27] Al-Mashushi for «Al-Ayyam»: Our forces are an ally on the ground to secure the borders of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Egypt <https://www.alayyam.info/news/89D2HZVM-61QHE7-D7F7#.XwO4Sdk0VBs>.  
twitter

[28] The Yemeni government formally rejects Griffiths latest proposals <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2387916>



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