



SHABWA'S JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF A REGIONAL PROXY CONFLICT

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COVER PHOTO: Soldiers guard a checkpoint on the road between Ataq and the coast, in Shabwa governorate, Yemen, on November 13, 2020 // Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In pre-Christian times, Yemen's Shabwa region was the capital of three ancient Yemeni kingdoms: Qataban, Osan and Hadramawt. It possesses incredible geographic diversity, with a picturesque Arabian Sea coastline along with mountains and desert landscapes. It is home to powerful local tribes as well as to one of the most delicious organic honeys in the world. In recent decades, the remote governorate in southern Yemen has rarely been the subject of media attention, only occasionally making international news when a town falls into the hands of Al-Qaeda or an opportunity arises in oil and gas production.

During the course of the ongoing conflict, however, Shabwa has become a microcosm of regional proxy conflict in Yemen. The interests, agendas and struggles of outside powers intertwine in Shabwa, including the regional conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, behind-the-scenes influence operations involving Qatar and Oman, and even the battle for control in Yemen between two supposed allies, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). No future for the South, or Yemen at large, can be conceived without taking into account the influence of Shabwa — and that requires understanding, channeling or even neutralizing when possible, the outside interests

For Shabwanis, dealing with outsiders, their interests, and their various means of achieving them is nothing new. The area was part of the British-backed Federation of South Arabia before being forcibly incorporated into Soviet-backed Marxist South Yemen. Today, the main Western presence in the governorate comes in the form of international oil companies. Shabwa, as one of the three oil-rich "Black Triangle" governorates in Yemen along with Hadramawt and Marib, is home to the Balhaf liquified natural gas (LNG) export terminal, the country's largest investment project. Austrian OMV restarted production at Shabwa's Habban oil field in 2018 while France's Total and American Hunt Oil Company hold large stakes in the Balhaf export terminal, which ceased operating in 2015 and is currently a base for Emirati forces

Non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a largely homegrown affiliate of the international organization, have been attracted to its vast spaces with a history of weak governmental oversight as well as its open sea and desert borders. The armed Houthi movement has controlled large parts of Shabwa as well, beginning in 2015 until being forced to withdraw two years later after defeats in battles with local tribes and Saudi- and UAE-backed forces. For the Houthis, controlling all of Shabwa would offer a route toward southern expansion, access to the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea, additional avenues for weapons smuggling, and a piece of the Black Triangle — none of which Saudi Arabia or the UAE would be keen to concede.

LOCAL FACTORS CAN OUTWEIGH SAUDI, EMIRATI INTERESTS

Outside players in Shabwa have competed for the loyalties of various tribes, local authorities, and armed factions in the governorate. The struggle between the Saudi-backed Yemeni government and the Emirati-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) — allies turned rivals in the anti-Houthi coalition — has become the main political dividing line in the governorate in recent years. In August 2019, STC forces expelled government troops from the interim capital of Aden, before the STC, seeking to bring all of the former South Yemen under the group's control, set its eyes on Shabwa. The STC anticipated a quick victory following its successes in Aden and Abyan, but clashes broke out between the Shabwani Elite forces, a group formed by the UAE in 2016 for counterterrorism purposes, and troops loyal to the Yemeni government. The latter had received a green light, and later military and financial support, from Saudi Arabia to defend the governorate. In defiance of expectations, the battle in Shabwa's capital Ataq ended with a swift victory for the forces loyal to the local authority, led by Governor Mohammad Saleh bin Adio, who hails from the Laqmoush tribe and is a leader in the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (better known as Islah, a Yemeni party ideologically affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood). Shabwa, instead of proving a decisive step for the STC in its pursuit to reconstitute the former South Yemen, served as the bulwark against the expansion of STC forces eastward into Hadramawt and Al-Mahra governorates.

The Shabwa battle of August 2019 was decided by local factors, with tribal considerations outweighing military ones. This reflects the importance of foreign actors' abilities to secure tribal alliances. The battle also marked the introduction of a new round of regional proxy conflict in the governorate, especially between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia supports bin Adio while the UAE views his party, Islah, to be a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the political Islamist group Abu Dhabi has opposed across the Middle East. Bin Adio, unique for a Yemeni governor, has employed fierce and combative rhetoric against the UAE, calling more than once for the full departure of Emirati forces from the governorate, and most importantly, from the Balhaf gas facility. In late 2020, he said he ranks the UAE equal to the Houthis as an enemy.

Throughout the past 12 months, both Bin Adio's allies and STC forces have been building their weapons stocks in Shabwa, including securing missiles and

armed Land Cruisers. And in late June, tension between Yemeni government forces and STC supporters protesting house raids and the arrests of several senior STC officials in the governorate throughout the month prompted the STC to suspend its already weak communication with Saudi officials and other factions of the Yemeni government as well as its engagement in implementing the Riyadh Agreement. This tension and turmoil, along with the infusion of arms, only increases the likelihood of explosive results should regional powers further inflame local rivalries.

Shabwa is the last governorate in southern Yemen where Islah officials retain strong influence, with figures from the party controlling sensitive positions in the local authority, public utilities, the local media, and in the state-owned Yemen Petroleum Company. Bin Adio, as head of the Shabwa local authority, also chairs the governorate's security committee. The commander of the Shabwa Special Forces is close with Islah, as is Gahdal Hanash al-Awlaqi, commander of the 21st Mika Brigade, which is responsible for protecting oil-rich areas in the governorate and played a key role in resolving the battle of Ataq in the government's favor. Still, it is important to note that tribal significance and local politics generally outweigh broader political loyalties or Muslim Brotherhood affiliations in the governorate, particularly among Shabwa's military and security leadership. For example, the role of the General People's Congress, the former ruling party in Yemen under the Saleh regime, has substantially declined in Shabwa since 2011 despite its strong presence in tribal circles there for decades.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has placed its influence fully in support of Bin Adio. The governor considers Riyadh his important ally, and a small contingent of Saudi forces are stationed at Ataq airport, formerly a civilian airport that now serves as a military airbase for Saudi Arabia.

Bin Adio's political positions and loyalties have been compared to that of Marib Governor Sultan al-Aradah, a comparison that contains some truth but oversimplifies the dynamics. Both men have a substantial presence of Islah loyalists around them. The main difference is that Al-Aradah, hailing from the most important tribe in Marib, possessed the resources, tools and local backing to condition Islah toward serving his goals. In this way, Al-Aradah has avoided direct regional proxy conflicts in Marib, neutralizing the image of the governorate as an exclusive stronghold for Islah despite its prominence. Bin Adio, on the other hand, remains at the stage of building his independent tools of power, and does not — at least yet — possess the same space and ability to act as autonomously as Al-Aradah. This can partly be attributed to the fact that the UAE does not have any significant presence in Marib beyond the passive loyalties of some tribal sheikhs, while the Emirati presence in Shabwa is active and is represented by more than loyalties

Despite the defeat of its local allies in August 2019, and the broader pullout of the UAE from southern Yemen that November, Emirati military forces remain present in several areas of Shabwa. This includes the Balhaf facility on the Arabian Sea as well as Al-Alam military camp, north of Ataq city. The UAE also continues to pay the salaries of more than 7,000 members of the Shabwani Elite forces, some of whom fought against government forces in the August battles for the governorate. Most Shabwani Elite soldiers, however, have been sent home, with a relatively small number remaining stationed at the UAE-run military camps.

QATAR AND OMAN: LOOKING FOR OPPORTUNITIES

Other state actors such as Qatar and Oman have begun exploring opportunities in the governorate. Oman supports and hosts Shabwani sheikhs and social and political figures, including, until recently, Awad Mohammed Farid al-Awlaqi, the former military police chief who facilitated the entry of Houthi forces to the governorate in 2015. Al-Awlaqi traveled back to Sana'a via Shabwa in April 2021 and was appointed by the Houthi authorities as a Shabwa governor. Qatar, meanwhile, has provided many tribal sheikhs residing in Oman with cash in exchange for opposing the UAE by merely remaining neutral and not engaging in battles against the Houthis, or for challenging Emirati or Saudi interests. In 2020, Saleh al-Jabwani, a former minister of transportation who hails from Shabwa and is close to Qatar, financed the establishment of the Martyr Salem Qatan Battalion, which is under the umbrella of the Ataq Military Axis. This Battalion's forces are currently stationed less than 1.5 kilometers from Saudi forces in the city. Al-Jabwani only laughed when asked by the Sana'a Center in January 2021 whether the unit is funded by wealthy Yemeni businessman Ahmad al-Essi or Qatar. While unwilling to divulge its funding sources, Al-Jabwani confirmed the unit has bought weapons from the Yemeni market during the past two years.

Interestingly, Qatar, which generally backs Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated movements across the region, has not thus far managed to build any direct relationship with Bin Adio. The governor has generally avoided any affiliation with Doha, especially during the 2017 to early 2021 Saudi-Qatari crisis, because his relationship with Riyadh is paramount, and for which there is no alternative. Still, Qatar appears to be tacitly backing many individuals in Bin Adio's office, including members of an Islah faction close to the international Muslim Brotherhood. This Qatari support of Bin Adio and his team can be seen mainly through its media outlets, which have portrayed the UAE in a negative light in apparent attempts to embarrass or turn public sentiment against the Emiratis^[1].

Among outside powers, Saudi Arabia retains the greatest level of influence over the tribes of Shabwa, to the extent that many tribal figures and prominent

[1] In November 2020, for example, Qatari-owned and -funded media outlets including Al Jazeera and Bilqees TV channels published reports saying UAE forces had barred a visiting international media delegation from entering Balhaf. The Sana'a Center learned that the delegation, whose visit it had organized, had been blocked because the governor's office had failed to notify UAE troops. Even while journalists were waiting for word on whether they would get clearance, Al Jazeera began airing reports that the delegation had been barred entry. Bin Adio later denied coordinating with Qatari media to try to embarrass the UAE.

businessmen in the governorate possess both Yemeni and Saudi passports. The UAE has repeatedly attempted to attract the sheikhs of southern Shabwa with whom it formed the first two military brigades from for the Shabwani Elite, including the Himyar, Laqmoush and Noman tribes. However, even if these tribes, which are closest to the coast, swayed by the Emiratis, they possess less political influence than the inland tribes of Shabwa's rugged mountains. Moreover, the poverty of coastal tribes has often made their territories a center of rebellion and hostility against all forms of authority – for instance, they remained staunch supporters of the Southern Movement during the rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. On the other side of the spectrum, many tribes of inner Shabwa such as Al-Awaliq, Balharith and Bani Hilal have long standing commercial and familial relations with Saudi Arabia

Shabwa finds itself positioned as Yemen's latest arena for regional proxy wars. Political parties and local tribes have proven themselves capable of mitigating the intensity of regional competition and curtailing the scope of external involvement. Still, despite the relative stability Shabwa has maintained since late 2019, the potential exists for these proxy wars to escalate and spread beyond the governorate's border.

Farea Al-Muslimi Farea Al-Muslimi is chairman and co-founder of Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies. He is also an Associate Fellow at Chatham House. He previously worked for the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut and Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C. as a visiting scholar where he covered Yemen and Gulf.

This report is part of a series of publications by the Sana'a Center examining the roles of state and non-state foreign actors in Yemen.



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