



THE IMPACT OF THE SAUDI INTERVENTION ON SOCIAL NORMS IN AL-MAHRA

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Abdulkareem Ghanem

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COVER PHOTO : Mahri tribesmen, flying Yemeni and Al-Mahra flags, prepare for a protest in the Touf area of Hat district against the Saudi military presence in the governorate, September 24, 2018 // Sana'a Center photo by Yahya al-Sewari



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Yemeni governorate of Al-Mahra on the Arabian Sea bordering Oman has a unique cultural identity, its own ancient Semitic language and a distinct history. These factors have helped the governorate maintain its own customs and traditions and preserve social norms that maintain social cohesion and mitigate conflict.

But the Saudi military presence in Al-Mahra that began in 2017 has tested these social norms. Saudi forces have established military camps across the vast governorate and recruited thousands of locals into Saudi-backed forces, while buying the loyalty of local leaders and marginalizing those who oppose its presence.

This research found that social norms promoting social cohesion remain strong. So far, opposition to the Saudi intervention has been largely peaceful and local tribes have succeeded in maintaining fragile stability in the governorate. Yet, Saudi Arabia's provision of financial and political privileges to tribal leaders, in exchange for their support, has strained Mahri norms of common allegiance among tribes.

Investing in local capacities to enhance social cohesion and utilizing existing social assets could help reduce the destabilizing impact of external intervention in Al-Mahra. This will require strengthening social institutions, primarily the tribe; supporting state institutions; protecting Al-Mahra's cultural heritage; and raising awareness of the importance of social norms and values that support social cohesion and peace.

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing war in Yemen has destabilized large swathes of the country, yet the border governorate of Al-Mahra has remained relatively stable. This can be attributed largely to the social norms of the Mahri community, which offer a model for containing and resolving conflict. Although Al-Mahra has not been significantly affected by the war, the engagement of Saudi forces in the governorate since 2017 has threatened to destabilize society by reshaping political and social dynamics.

Saudi Arabia's stated aim in entering Al-Mahra was to curb arms smuggling through the governorate. It has expanded its military presence in Al-Mahra largely through buying tribal loyalties and recruiting locals into Saudi-backed security forces. In response, locals who opposed the Saudi presence formed a popular protest movement of demonstrations and sit-ins. Saudi Arabia's sometimes violent response to these protests has increased tension in Al-Mahra and tested the governorate's stability.

The Saudi intervention also challenges long-standing Omani support for and patronage of Mahri tribes. Oman shares cultural, security and economic interests with Al-Mahra locals that Muscat has nurtured since the early 1990s through offering them perks like Omani citizenship, political refuge during times of crisis, monthly salaries and aid projects in the Yemeni governorate.^[1] Many of the figures leading opposition to the Saudi presence retain ties to Oman.

When the war broke out, the Houthi authorities in Sana'a reduced salaries for state employees and tribal disputes broke out over control of the key Shahin crossing with Oman.^[2] The UAE and Saudi Arabia accused Oman of allowing arms smuggling to Sana'a via Al-Mahra, while Oman feared the war would lead to Al-Qaeda militants gaining a foothold on its border. The UAE was the first to begin training local recruits as a military force in 2015, before Saudi Arabia sent in troops in November 2017 with the apparent aim of supplanting Omani influence.

Heightened regional competition in Al-Mahra between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman risks polarizing an otherwise cohesive society in Yemen's easternmost governorate, which has remained relatively stable during the past 7 years of war. This paper takes a closer look at the impact of the Saudi military presence in Al-Mahra on local social norms modeled around conflict resolution, and presents recommendations to protect those norms, reduce social tension, contribute to peacebuilding and limit the impact of destabilizing policies in the governorate.

[1] Casey Coombs, "Al-Mahra: Where Regional Powers Define Local Politics," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, December 18, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/12284>

[2] Ahmed Nagi, "Oman's Boiling Yemeni Border," March 22, 2019, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/omans-boiling-yemeni-border-22588>



METHODOLOGY

This paper relied on qualitative research methods. Interviews were conducted with local experts in Al-Mahra, including community leaders, journalists and leaders of the Peaceful Protest Committee opposing the Saudi presence in the governorate, between May 2021 and July 2021. These interviews sought to explore the impact of the Saudi military presence on the local social norms that underpin peace and social cohesion.

In addition, 30 people in the districts of Al-Ghaydah, Shahin, Hawf and Sayhut responded to a questionnaire created by the author that aimed to better understand local perceptions toward the Saudi presence in the governorate and any resulting evolution in social norms. Participants, including 10 women, were reached through educational institutions and organizations in the governorate capital, Al-Ghaydah. Logistical difficulties and limited resources prevented a more representative sample for the questionnaire.

BACKGROUND

Al-Mahra governorate is located in eastern Yemen, to the west of Oman and south of Saudi Arabia. There are 37 tribes in the governorate, interlinked by cooperation and intermarriage and governed by strict tribal norms that are used to resolve local disputes.^[3] Many tribes in Al-Mahra extend across the borders with Oman and Saudi Arabia.

A recent study^[4] identified five pillars of Al-Mahra's "tribal code of conduct": Mahri tribes unite in solidarity against outsiders; violence within a tribe is taboo since blood ties prevail; carrying weapons does not necessitate their use, and tribal displays of arms can encourage compromise by highlighting the potential cost of violence; victors do not win the spoils of war, but instead must compensate the losing party for their losses; and mediation within tribes discourages and limits conflict.

This Mahri code of conduct evolved from the historic traditions of different tribes that merged into broader norms during the 1960s and 1970s, partly in response to the uprisings of the era.^[5] In the 1960s, amid an uprising against British rule in southern Yemen, Al-Mahra transformed from being a sultanate to a part of the newly-formed People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), a process that tested its unique ethnocultural heritage. Al-Mahra also became embroiled in the Dhofar Rebellion in neighboring Oman.^[6] When the uprising was quashed in the 1970s, Mahris who had supported the victorious Sultan Qaboos urged him not to punish the rebels, in the spirit of Mahri tribal tradition in which the victor bears the responsibility for reconciliation.^[7] The adherence to a tribal code of conduct helped the Mahris contain conflicts during this period. Mahri social norms, on the other hand, were not the result of political events but rather the product of a culture that directs the behavior of Al-Mahra tribes.

Amid the current rivalry between Oman and Saudi Arabia for influence in Al-Mahra, both sides have cultivated ties with pragmatic Mahri tribal leaders. Following Oman's example, Riyadh has engaged in a campaign to win allegiance through granting tribal leaders Saudi citizenship. Among those targeted was the

[3] Amer Al-Dumaini, "Learn about key figures and forces at the forefront of Al-Mahra governorate today [AR]," Al-Mawqea Post, August 28, 2021, <https://almawqea.net/reports/39333>; for more on Bin Afrar see, Casey Coombs, "Al-Mahra: Where Regional Powers Define Local Politics," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, December 18, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/12284>

[4] Ahmed Nagi, "Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 31, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/eastern-yemen-s-tribal-model-for-containing-conflict-pub-81403>

[5] Ahmed Nagi, "Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 31, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/eastern-yemen-s-tribal-model-for-containing-conflict-pub-81403>

[6] Elisabeth Kendall, "The Mobilization of Yemen's Eastern Tribes: Al-Mahra's Self Organization Model" in "Building the New Yemen: Power, Politics and Society in the 21st Century" ed. Marie-Christine Heinze, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/12505308/The_Mobilization_of_Yemens_Eastern_Tribes_Al_Mahras_Self_Organization_Model

[7] Ahmed Nagi, "Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 31, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/eastern-yemen-s-tribal-model-for-containing-conflict-pub-81403>

Samouda tribe, a powerful tribe that straddles the Yemen-Saudi border. Part of the tribe was led by Sheikh Abdullah Issa bin Afrar – son of the last ruler of the Al-Mahra Sultanate – who obtained Saudi residency and financial benefits from Saudi Arabia.^[8] When protests against the presence of the Saudi forces expanded in 2018,^[9] Riyadh benefited from its relationship with the Samouda tribe. Saudi Arabia was also able to play a role in convincing Bin Afrar to shift his support in 2019-2020 from the Omani-backed Peaceful Protest Committee^[10] to closer alignment with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.^[11]

Bin Afrar faced local hostility upon his return from a meeting with Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman in September 2019,^[12] since the meeting was seen as violating the norm of common allegiance. This reaction came not just from activists opposing the Saudi military presence in Al-Mahra, but also from other members of the Afrar family, who saw Abdullah shifting from traditional allegiance to Oman toward Saudi Arabia.^[13] On July 10, 2020, the Afrar family replaced Abdullah as head of the family council with his cousin, Mohammed bin Afrar.^[14]

[8] Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's Al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 5, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

[9] Emile Roy, "Yemen's Fractured South: Socotra and Mahrah," ACLED, May 31, 2019, <https://acleddata.com/2019/05/31/yemens-fractured-south-socotra-and-mahrah/>

[10] Oman had also granted Omani citizenship to Bin Afrar, along with 68 other Mahris, in 2017. "Oman allows Omani-Yemeni dual citizenship [AR]," Al Jazeera, December 12, 2018, www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2018/12/10/عمان-الجنسية-اليمن

[11] Casey Coombs, "Dueling Mahri Scions Reveal Gulf Competition in Eastern Yemen," The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 14, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/14598#Mahri_scions

[12] "A meeting between Bin Afrar and the Deputy Minister of Defense of Saudi Arabia. Does it end the tension in Al-Mahra? [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, September 1, 2019, <https://almasdaronline.com/article/a-meeting-between-sheikh-and-bin-afarar-and-the-deputy-minister-of-defense-of-saudi-arabia-does-it-end-the-tension-in-al-mahrah>

[13] "Activists: Bin Afrar is a 'traitor' and Al-Mahra is Yemeni and against the occupation [AR]," Huna Aden, July 12, 2020, <https://hunaaden.com/news59316.html>

[14] "Activists: Bin Afrar is a 'traitor' and Al-Mahra is Yemeni and against the occupation [AR]," Huna Aden, July 12, 2020, <https://hunaaden.com/news59316.html>; Casey Coombs, "Dueling Mahri Scions Reveal Gulf Competition in Eastern Yemen," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, July 14, 2021, https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/14598#Mahri_scions

PERCEPTIONS OF CHANGES TO MAHRI NORMS

The following section explores how social norms in Al-Mahra have been affected by the Saudi military presence in the governorate. These include: common allegiance; maintaining traditional power and state institutions; reciprocity; the rejection of extremism; avoiding violence and the refusal to militarize.

Common Allegiance

Allegiance establishes a bond between the individual and the group, whether it takes the form of a bond of blood, race, lineage or religion.^[15] This bond holds relationships together in adversity.^[16] The great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun referred to *asabiyya*, or loyalty to the group in order to maintain the survival of tribal society in the face of adversity, as the main engine for the rise of civilization, while a loosening of *asabiyya* would threaten civilization's decline.^[17] In Al-Mahra, allegiance consists of the social bonds formed due to kinship relations, common geography and language, alliances between tribes and intertwining networks between individuals. The questionnaire conducted for this research found that more than half of respondents believed that common allegiance among the Mahri people has not declined due to the Saudi military intervention.

Criteria for adhering to a norm can be central or marginal, depending on the level of benefits in upholding the norm and the degree of social punishment for violating it. Material and political incentives offered to those who would support the Saudi military presence may have reduced the impact of social sanctions for violating the norm of common allegiance.

Several people questioned defined common allegiance as “the interest of Al-Mahra is above all.”^[18] In other words, public interest is held to supersede all other interests. The norm of common allegiance can be realized even while other allegiances are divided, and tribes who opposed the presence of Saudi forces in Al-Mahra invoked the norm of common allegiance to rally support.

In Al-Mahra, the unique identity of the community supersedes other identities: Mehri is the spoken language, and marriage and lineage are largely confined within Mahri society.^[19] Mehri is spoken during inter-communal dialogue and conflict resolution, limiting destabilizing outside interference.^[20]

[15] "Allegiance [AR]," Arab Encyclopedia 2022, <http://arab-ency.com.sy/ency/overview/7246>

[16] Lauge N. Skovgaard Poulsen, "Loyalty in world politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, 26, no. 4, December 2020, pp. 1156–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066120905895>

[17] Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima*, Part 2 [AR] (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan, 1992), pp. 108–110.

[18] Author's interview with Sheikh Aboud bin Haboud Qumsit, vice chairman of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 18, 2021.

[19] Ahmed Nagi, "Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, March 31, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/eastern-yemen-s-tribal-model-for-containing-conflict-pub-81403>

[20] Author's interview with Basel Saleh, a Mahri journalist close to the Peaceful Protest Committee, June 8, 2021.

Yet, among Mahris who participated in the questionnaire, just two in five said the tendency of Mahri society to maintain social norms and values remained high. This suggests there is a perception among some that commitment to traditional social norms is in decay. At the same time, there are rising calls to maintain cultural traditions and preserve customs and values, particularly among tribes opposed to the Saudi presence in the governorate.^[21]

Maintaining Traditional Power and State Institutions

Among questionnaire participants, less than half believed that Saudi forces take into account maintaining the status quo in Al-Mahra. Some leaders of the opposition to Saudi intervention argued that Saudi forces have overstepped local social norms by replacing political figures who oppose them with loyalists.^[22] For instance, Riyadh pushed for the appointment of Hariz Arman bin Habta to replace Sheikh Mohammed Barakat Samouda as leader of the Samouda tribe after a critical speech the latter made in November 2018.^[23] Othman al-Faqih Balhaf was appointed as sheikh of the Balhaf tribe and its representative in Saudi Arabia, of which he is a national, after Sheikh Tawakkol Salem Tawakkol Yassin Balhaf made statements critical of Saudi shootings of protesters.^[24] Likewise, Salem Saad al-Sharaf Kalshat was appointed sheikh of the Kalshat tribe, replacing Sheikh Amer Saad Kalshat, who publicly opposed the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra.^[25] All three of the sheikhs were members of the Peaceful Protest Committee established in June 2018 that organized sit-ins against the Saudi military presence.

Such interference in local affairs is unacceptable for the people of Al-Mahra, according to protest leader Sheikh Aboud bin Haboud Qumsit. “We have no problem with the ruler being from Sana’a or any Yemeni region. Our problem is that we don’t want a Saudi or any other country’s officer to rule us. Al-Mahra holds fast to its sovereignty and does not accept foreign domination of its land,” he said.^[26]

Saudi intervention in local leadership has extended beyond tribal sheikhs. Riyadh put pressure on the internationally recognized government of President Abdo Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to punish those opposed to its presence. Governor Mohammed bin Kuddah was dismissed by presidential decree in November 2017 after insisting that the Al-Ghaydah airport’s administrative, security and military

[21] Author’s interview with Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

[22] Author’s interview with Sheikh Aboud Bin Haboud Qumsit, vice chairman of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 18, 2021.

[23] “Sheikh Mohammed Barakat Samouda Al-Mahri’s speech to Saudi Arabia [AR],” YouTube, November 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NH1RzujOclw>

[24] Sheikh Tawakkol is head of the executive body of the General Council of the Sons of Mahra and Socotra, a body that has published many statements criticizing Saudi forces in Al-Mahra – for example, a statement issued on Twitter on November 18, 2018, condemned the killing of two protesters in the Huswain area by Saudi forces, <https://twitter.com/gcaspoofficial?lang=ar>

[25] “Amer Saad Kalshat: The sit-ins in Al-Mahra have been suspended unless we return and raise the ceiling of demands [AR],” Al-Mahrah Post, July 15, 2018, <https://almahrahpost.com/news/4638#Yd4Ac7P3IU>

[26] Author’s interview with Sheikh Aboud Bin Haboud Qumsit, vice chairman of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

cadre remain intact and that the local authorities not be bypassed.^[27] He was later detained and placed under house arrest by Saudi forces during a visit to Riyadh, where he had been invited by the Yemeni presidency.^[28] Hadi's government replaced Kuddah, who holds Omani citizenship, with Rajeh Bakrit, a supporter of the Saudi presence. Later, in July 2018, Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, then-deputy governor for desert affairs and a leading figure in the Peaceful Protest Committee, was dismissed for refusing to visit the commander of the Saudi forces in Yemen, Prince Fahd bin Turki.^[29] Al-Mahra's security director, Mohammed Qahtan, who had been mediating an agreement between Saudi forces and the protest committee, was dismissed the same day. Finally, Ali Afrar, the director of the Human Rights Office in Al-Mahra and an Al-Hurayzi loyalist, was dismissed in January 2019 after publishing a report documenting rights violations by Saudi forces in Al-Mahra.^[30]

Saudi Arabia also set up camps for its soldiers and local recruits without taking into account the presence of Yemeni security and military institutions, according to opposition leader Al-Hurayzi.^[31] According to him, such interventions in local leadership not only punish those who oppose the Saudi military presence in Al-Mahra; they change local realities, reshape social alliances and undermine values, norms and social cohesion.

Reciprocity

The principle of reciprocity means that people are usually kinder when responding to acts of affection, and more aggressive when responding to hostile acts, than might be expected if they were to act solely out of self-interest.^[32] Outside groups can utilize this power of reciprocity when dealing with local groups to improve the success of their interventions. For example, UAE officials have urged the people of Socotra governorate (which was formerly part of the Al-Mahra Sultanate) to work with them, claiming to have built ports on the archipelago for the sake of the local population.^[33] Inhabitants of Al-Mahra and Socotra are aware that these acts are done in the expectation of something in return.

Slightly less than half of Mahrists questioned believed that Al-Mahra's community has benefited from the presence of the Saudi forces. For example, since their arrival in Al-Mahra on November 3, 2017, Saudi forces have made promises to the local population to rehabilitate the Al-Ghaydah airport. Although it was agreed

[27] "Former Minister of State and Governor of Al-Mahra, Mohammed Abdullah Kuddah: Saudi Arabia failed in Al-Mahra, and these are the details of my dismissal and travel ban [AR]," Al-Hodhod news, July 1, 2019, <https://alhodhodnews.com/2982>

[28] Statement issued by the Kuddah tribe, March 5, 2019.

[29] Mohammed Sharaf, "Al-Mahra Al-Yemeni: The Soft Conflict between Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman [AR]," Gulf House, February 3, 2019, <https://gulfhouse.org/posts/3498>; author's interview with Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

[30] Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's Al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 5, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

[31] Author's interview with Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

[32] Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter, "Fairness and Retaliation: The Economics of Reciprocity," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 14 (3), 2000.

[33] For example, the comments of UAE foreign minister Anwar Gargash denying a colonial interest in Socotra in "Early Aspirations [AR]," Al Jazeera Youtube channel, October 18, 2021, (43-44 mins), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6tyVttFiZ4>

that it would be used for civilian purposes and humanitarian aid, the airport fell under the control of the Saudi military, as did the ports of Nishtun and Sarfait.

According to Basel Saleh, a journalist and activist against the Saudi presence, Saudi authorities have given some local politicians monthly salaries of 20,000 Saudi riyals (approximately US\$5,330),^[34] and has financed projects in the electricity and transport sectors and at the Nishtun port, the Shahin border crossing and the Al-Ghaydah airport. But Saudi forces have also been heavy-handed at times, such as when it expelled Yemeni soldiers and employees from the airport on July 11, 2021, sparking protests demanding that Saudi forces leave and hand control of public infrastructure back to the local authorities.^[35] Still, Saudi Arabia was able to recruit locals to control the ports and facilitate Saudi control of military sites in Al-Ghaydah and Shahin districts.

On August 20, 2021, thousands of armed Mahri tribesmen demonstrated against the Saudi military presence and issued a statement expressing willingness to use force to expel foreign forces – the first time they had talked publicly in such terms.^[36] In response, Saudi forces withdrew military equipment from the districts of Al-Masila, Huswain and Sayhut to Al-Ghaydah airport and assigned loyal sheikhs to help protect the Jadwa military camp in Huswain district.^[37] There have been no reported demonstrations against the Saudi presence since.

Rejection of Extremism

In general, Mahris follow the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam. There is also a strong culture of Sufism^[38] in the governorate and rejection of ultra-conservative ideologies such as Salafism. Saudi Arabia has been accused of using extremist Salafi groups to help strengthen its control over Al-Mahra, threatening the identity and peaceful ideology of Mahri society.^[39] In early 2018, the arrival of several hundred Salafis from elsewhere in Yemen to the town of Qishn in Al-Mahra sparked local opposition and accusations that Saudi Arabia backed their resettlement.^[40] Though Salafi groups in Yemen have diverse ideological approaches, some are close to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic

[34] Author's interview with Basel Saleh, a Mahri journalist close to the Peaceful Protest Committee, June 8, 2021.

[35] "Saudi forces expel Yemeni soldiers from Al-Ghaydah Airport [AR]," Al-Mahriah TV, July 11, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/Almahriah.TV/videos/614297072875180/>

[36] "Saudi Arabia's setbacks continue: Al-Mahra tribes are rising up against the occupation [AR]," Al-Akhbar, August 23, 2021, <https://al-akhbar.com/Yemen/314803>; "Al-Mahra tribes rise up against the occupation. And the leader Al-Herayzi is at the forefront [AR]," Hayrout News, August 23, 2021, <https://hayrout.com/76844/>

[37] "Al-Ghaydah public gathering accuses Britain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE of fueling terrorism in Al-Mahra [AR]," Al-Mahriya satellite channel, August 21, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TeWYmcinf

[38] Ahmed Nagi, "Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 31, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/eastern-yemen-s-tribal-model-for-containing-conflict-pub-81403>

[39] Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's Al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 5, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

[40] Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's Al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 5, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

State in their views.^[41]

Among questionnaire participants, a majority believed the presence of the Salafis in Al-Mahra is linked to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Al-Hurayzi, head of the protest committee, expressed concern that a new religious-political group in Al-Mahra could be transformed into an armed force against protestors.^[42] Local media reported that the Salafis are establishing media outlets and control over some mosques with the help of local authorities, with the intent to spread their religious ideology and bolster Saudi control over the region.^[43]

According to Al-Hurayzi, Mahris are particularly concerned about the Salafi view that non-Salafis have strayed from Sunni religious teachings on questions such as Islamic dress codes, raising concerns about division appearing within Mahri society over religious norms.^[44]

Avoiding Violence

Despite tension between Saudi forces and elements of Mahri society opposing the Saudi presence, violent confrontation has so far been largely avoided. Among questionnaire participants, over two-thirds believed that social norms remained effective in preventing or mitigating violence. This suggests a strong ongoing adherence to this norm, despite several years of Saudi military intervention. Instead of violent confrontation, opponents of the Saudi intervention have organized peaceful protests. During the protest in November 2019 over the establishment of a new camp for Saudi forces in Al-Anfaq in Huswain district, two protesters were shot and killed. Despite anger over the deaths, tribes called for self-restraint and instead reached an agreement to ensure the protesters' demands were met.^[45]

Sheikh Aboud bin Haboud Qumsit, a leader in the protest committee, commented on this strategy of pragmatism, saying: "We are trying to deal with the problem calmly, deliberately and wisely."^[46] Saudi forces also appear keen not to escalate tension. For example, amid discontent over its appointment of Rajeh Bakrit as governor, Riyadh shifted course in February 2020 and appointed a previous

[41] Peter Salisbury, "Box 2: Unintended consequences – Yemen's Salafist problem," in Chapter 2, "The Civil War in Yemen: A Structural Analysis," Chatham House, December 2017, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/12/yemen-national-chaos-local-order-o/2-yemens-civil-war-structural-analysis>

[42] Author's interview with Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

[43] "Frightening activity by extremist groups in Mahra amid accusations against Saudi Arabia [AR]," Al-Mahra Post, October 14, 2020, https://almahrahpost.com/news/20356#.Ydx_7dHP1Dg

[44] Author's interview with Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

[45] "An investigation reveals new details of the 'tunnels' incident in Al-Mahra [AR]," Al-Mahra post, April 13, 2019, <https://almahrahpost.com/news/10321#.YffbIPVBxp->

[46] An interview with Sheikh Aboud bin Haboud Qumsit, vice chairman of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 18, 2021.

incumbent, Mohammed Ali Yasser,^[47] a more popular local choice who has tried to balance traditional Mahri ties to Oman with the more recent Saudi influence.^[48]

Refusal to Militarize

Mahri tribes have generally been wary of settling conflict through the use of force to avoid reproducing cycles of violence. However, local tribal leaders have expressed concern about the impact of militarization on this aspect of social cohesion and identity in Al-Mahra.^[49]

One example of local resistance to militarization was the insistence by local residents that the Al-Ghaydah airport should not be used as a military base as a condition for agreeing to the Saudi presence there. Yet despite this, the airport was militarized and thousands of local tribal members were recruited into Saudi-affiliated units. Further, Saudi Arabia supported some tribes with both money and weapons, and as a result, the configuration of armed tribal groups changed dramatically.^[50]

According to one source, by May 2021, the number of recruits from the local population into Saudi-backed forces reached 16,000, with members receiving monthly salaries of 1,500 Saudi riyals (approximately US\$400).^[51] This undermines Mahri tribes' reluctance to militarize, one of the foundations of communal peace and stability in Al-Mahra. In reaction, the local opposition to the Saudi presence has expanded the scope of peaceful protests. In this context, a slight majority of questionnaire participants believed the protests have contributed to limiting Saudi forces' push toward the militarization of Al-Mahra society

[47] "Republican decision to appoint Mohammed Ali Yasser as governor of Al-Mahra governorate [AR]," Saba Net, February 23, 2020, <https://www.sabanew.net/viewstory/59351>

[48] Casey Coombs, "Al-Mahra: Where Regional Powers Define Local Politics," Sana'a Center For Strategic Studies, December 18, 2020, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/12284>

[49] "Al-Mahra: Saudi Arabia Attempting to Limit Omani Clout" in "Hunger, Diplomacy, and Ruthless Friends: Yemen Annual Report 2018," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, January 22, 2019, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/the-yemen-review/6808#PD-Mahra>

[50] Ahmed Najji, "Oman's Boiling Yemeni Border," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 22, 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/03/22/oman-s-boiling-yemeni-border-pub-78668>

[51] Author's interview with Nasser bin Hakim bin 'Uwaydh, a Mahri political activist and journalist, June 28, 2021.

THE ROAD AHEAD

The following section presents options for limiting the impact of the Saudi military intervention on the social norms upon which social cohesion and peace in Al-Mahra are based.

Highlighting the Risks of Outside Interference and Supporting Local Government

The Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen in March 2015 to return the internationally recognized government to power after it was toppled by the armed Houthi movement. But in the view of protest leaders in Al-Mahra, regional countries used this situation to pursue their own economic and geopolitical interests in Yemen, in particular Al-Mahra.^[52] They point to the governorate's strategic value as Yemen's second-largest governorate and a potential source of oil and gas, and its location on the borders of Oman and Saudi Arabia.^[53] Al-Mahra's position on the Arabian Sea has also raised speculation that Saudi Arabia seeks to construct a pipeline through the governorate to export oil, reducing dependence on the Strait of Hormuz where regional political tensions run high.^[54]

Saudi Arabia's stated objective in sending forces to Al-Mahra was curbing arms smuggling through the governorate.^[55] However, the scale and cost of Saudi military activity in Al-Mahra have raised questions: since its intervention, Riyadh has built dozens of military camps, recruited thousands of locals and distributed benefits to loyal tribal figures. Such expenditure appears disproportionate to the goal of combatting arms smuggling, lending credence to the skepticism of the local opposition about Saudi intentions.

Protest leaders have increased their influence by highlighting these possible Saudi motivations as well as drawing attention to the flaws of the Saudi intervention and its failure to take local norms into consideration. Sheikh Qumsit, of the Peaceful Protest Committee, explained: "What Saudi Arabia did in Al-Mahra has nothing to do with the social norms that regulate neighborly relations, nor the religious, moral and legal norms for dealing with Muslims."^[56]

This approach by the protest leaders has been effective in expanding local

[52] Author's interview with Sheikh Aboud bin Haboud Qumsit, vice chairman of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 18, 2021.

[53] Brian M. Perkins, "Saudi Arabia and the UAE in al-Mahra: Securing Interests, Disrupting Local Order, and Shaping a Southern Military," The Jamestown Foundation, March 1, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/saudi-arabia-and-the-uae-in-al-mahra-securing-interests-disrupting-local-order-and-shaping-a-southern-military/>

[54] Yehya Abuzaid, "Has Riyadh Woken Up From Its Pipeline Dream?," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 19, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/16042>

[55] Yahya al-Sewari, "Yemen's Al-Mahra: From Isolation to the Eye of a Geopolitical Storm," Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, July 5, 2021, <https://sanaacenter.org/publications/analysis/7606>

[56] Author's interview with Sheikh Aboud bin Haboud Qumsit, vice chairman of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 18, 2021.

opposition to the Saudi forces in Al-Mahra, including through a renewed effort to activate the role of state institutions, including security and military agencies, while avoiding confrontation with the local authorities cooperating with Saudi Arabia. This strengthening of state organs, including through financial support, could help remove Saudi justifications for continued military intervention in the future. Local commentators favor the idea of building up state institutions as a way to establish a long-term accommodation with the Saudi forces. But the ongoing collapse of the Yemeni economy, and the Saudi political grip over Al-Mahra, could make this difficult to implement in practice. For this reason, Mahris are insisting on the right to supervise the ports of Al-Mahra, to ensure that they operate in the interests of the local population and the rest of Yemen as an entry point for goods. They also reject the threat to the social order and cultural identity that the Saudi intervention has created.

While the collapse of the Yemeni state and the weakness of its institutions created an opening for Saudi Arabia to intervene, it also prompted the tribal opposition to take on some of the functions of self-governance, as the last line of defense for the community. In this way, the opposition to the Saudi presence in Al-Mahra could transform the problem of state weakness into a political opportunity. The opposition could gain in popularity if it can stem the negative repercussions of Saudi interference.

Preserving Al-Mahra's Unique Cultural Heritage

The Saudi military intervention and Riyadh's efforts to rebuild tribal alliances in its favor threaten to undermine the governorate's unique cultural identity. According to Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, leader of the Peaceful Protest Committee, Saudi interference is working systematically to obliterate Mahri culture and identity.^[57] Despite Al-Mahra's strong social cohesion, the influx of political money, religious influence and militarization have tested the community's ability to uphold its heritage and values. The protest movement has adopted a two-fold strategy to protect the governorate's unique cultural nature, targeting external actors and working internally.

Interviews with Al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protests Committee, and Balhaf, the communications chief of the Committee, revealed some efforts by the Peaceful Protests Committee to preserve the unique cultural and linguistic identity in Al-Mahrah in response to what is seen as an external threat to undermine their culture. Externally, the protest movement is appealing to the international community and human rights organizations to advocate for the protection of the Mahri cultural identity and language, in line with the principles of cultural

[57] Author's interview with Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

diversity and coexistence.^[58] Internally, residents of Al-Mahra have been encouraged to uphold their customs and traditions by the protest movement, in an effort to reduce the harms of foreign interference.^[59] For example, an official from the protest movement has noted that efforts to educate families about the need to stop their children from engaging with extremist groups have helped preserve social cohesion.^[60]

According to American writer Henry Hazlitt, the “rules of morality constitute a tacit social contract” by which the interests of the individual and society are in harmony.^[61] This is especially true in a traditional society such as Al-Mahra, where social norms are the tools that support communal peace. The norms that have weakened as a result of the Saudi intervention can be strengthened by adhering to the moral system that supports them. This could include the value of tolerance, which in the Mahri context means forgiving fellow tribe members, seeking common points of agreement and setting aside disagreements.^[62] This could contribute to strengthening common allegiances, a norm that has declined during the Saudi intervention.

According to the rationalist interpretation in social theory, these criteria of coexistence serve the interests of the local tribal community and could hinder the aims of external actors engaging in intervention. On the other hand, the community becomes vulnerable to manipulation by outside forces through enticements and intimidation. The cooperative relationship and balance among local communities might shift to competition, which could evolve into forms of conflict.

[58] Author's interview with Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

[59] Author's interview with Sheikh Ali Salem al-Hurayzi, head of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 24, 2021.

[60] Interview with Ahmad Balhaf, communications chief of the Peaceful Protest Committee, "Balhaf: Saudi Arabia is an occupying state practicing terrorism against the owners of the land [AR]," Al-Mahrah Post, February 21, 2020, <https://almahrahpost.com/news/15381#YeVL-tHP1D8>

[61] Henry Hazlitt, *The Foundations of Morality* (Irvington- on-Hudson, New York: Foundation for Economic Education, 1998 [1964], 3rd ed.), p. xii.

[62] Author's interview with Sheikh Aboud bin Haboud Qumsit, vice chairman of the Peaceful Protest Committee in Al-Mahra, May 18, 2021.

CONCLUSION

The Saudi military intervention has led to the fragmenting of allegiances within Al-Mahra society. Riyadh has sought to gain loyalists among local leaders and tribes by providing money and political and social influence, in exchange for breaking the norm of common allegiance among Al-Mahra tribes. Riyadh has also maximized the risks to those who resist its intervention by marginalizing leaders and sheikhs who oppose the Saudi presence and replacing them with pro-Saudi figures. This approach has created a rift within Al-Mahra society. Although the boundaries of this division are still primarily political and have not yet caused a split in the structure of the Al-Mahra tribes, the continuation of this approach could weaken the norm of common allegiance and destabilize social cohesion.

The impact of Saudi intervention on Mahri norms promoting reconciliation and containment of conflict seems limited at this stage. Saudi Arabia has invested in winning loyalties, forming armed groups, establishing military bases and security checkpoints. It is in Riyadh's interest to avoid violent escalation, but the ability of Al-Mahra tribes to continue to minimize tension is becoming increasingly difficult. The Saudi forces' surplus military, financial and political power gives them confidence that the local resistance will eventually accept their existence.

Relative stability has been achieved in areas where Saudi forces are present due to the fact that the opposition strategy has been to operate within the boundaries of peaceful protest. The protest statement of August 2021 raised the possibility, however, of crossing that line. Even though thousands of locals have joined armed groups linked to Saudi forces, there is still reluctance toward militarization, manifested in the peaceful nature of the protests and the resistance to the militarization of key government infrastructure. However, locals who receive salaries from the Saudi forces derive financial benefit from the militarization, helping those forces extend their control and keeping those Mahri recruits away from any temptation to engage in acts of violence.

Investing in local capacities to enhance social cohesion and utilizing existing social assets could help reduce the destabilizing impact of external intervention in Al-Mahra. This can be achieved through preserving social institutions such as the tribe, supporting state institutions, protecting Al-Mahra's unique cultural heritage such as language and other region-specific customs, and raising awareness of the importance of norms and values that support social cohesion and peace.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are offered to guide efforts to protect Mahri social norms that reduce social tension, contribute to peacebuilding and limit the impact of destabilizing policies in the governorate:

- Human rights organizations, the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other relevant stakeholders should engage in advocacy to support Al-Mahra and protect its unique cultural identity.
- Universities, think tanks and research institutes should conduct research to evaluate the military intervention in Al-Mahra and explore alternative options for Yemen's neighbors to realize their security and commercial interests.
- The Saudi-led coalition should help strengthen the capacity of Yemen's security and military institutions to carry out their functions. They should ensure that Al-Mahra's location and vital facilities are not exploited in activities such as smuggling weapons to the Houthi authorities that threaten local and regional security and stability. Further, Saudi-backed armed groups should be integrated into the Yemeni army and the Yemeni government's security apparatus.
- Future reports and discussions on Al-Mahra in the orbit of UN organizations and other NGOs concerned with Yemen should consider external interventions that risk tearing the social fabric of Mahri society as a possible cause of conflict.

Dr. Abdulkareem Ghanem is a researcher in political sociology. He is the author of *Al-Wa'i al-Siyasi fi al-Mujtama' al-Yamani* (Political Awareness in Yemeni Society, 2016), as well as several research papers on society, tribes and political and social transformations in Yemen. He is a senior researcher at the Arabia Felix Center for Studies and a member of the Arab Sociological Association.

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