South Yemen Update

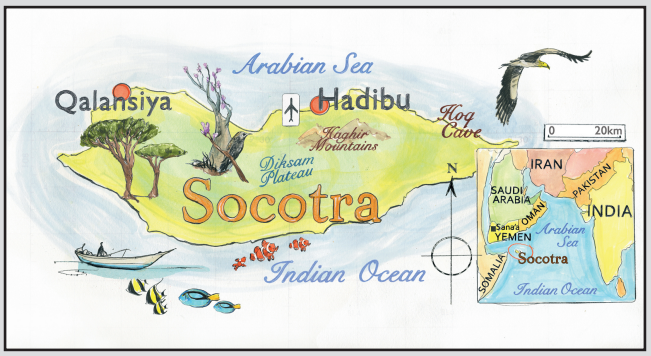
Newsletter of the Friends of South Yemen **Issue 5 — 16th October - 15th November 2020**

Spotlight on Socotra:

MILITARY BASES AND INTELLIGENCE GATHERING ACTIVITIES THREATEN IDYLLIC ISLAND

Described by an intrepid traveller as an idyllic island forgotten by man, blessed by the gods, Socotra has not managed to escape from the conflict which has ravaged Yemen for the past six years.

On June 20 this year the Southern Transitional Council (STC) seized all government and military locations on the island, declared self administrative authority and appointed its own acting governor. The move, carried out by a small number of fighters and little bloodshed, followed the STC's declaration of self-rule in Aden and the areas under its control, which proved to be a significant turning point in the Yemeni civil war and indicated the Southerners' intention to eventually establish an independent state.



The Internationally Recognized Government (IRG) led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi condemned the action as a full-fledged coup and accused STC forces of attacking government buildings in gang-style behaviour. The deposed governor of Socotra, Ramzi Mahrous, accused the coalition and the UAE of turning a blind eye to the takeover of the island. The STC reportedly expelled dozens of Yemenis from the northern governorates who live on the island, transporting them in small boats under the pretext that they worked in the private sector.

The UAE, the main backer of the STC, has crystal clear strategic interests evident in its April 2018 deployment of heavy arms and troops to the island, as part of the coalition fighting the Houthis. Dubai Ports World has established a number of ports along the Red Sea and has identified Socotra for future business expansion, which has gone hand in hand with aid projects and a recent charm offensive to get the locals on side. With a portfolio of 78 operational marine and inland terminals supported by more than 50 related businesses in 40 countries across six continents, the presence of Dubai Ports World in Socotra could seal it for the UAE, making it an extremely powerful nation. The UAE's control over the islands is reflected in the fact that it continues to issue tourist visas to those travelling on direct flights to Socotra, an initiative that the Socotri and IRG authorities oppose.

Mohammed Al Basha, of the US-based Navanti Group which conducts specialized research on food security, logistical challenges and security in Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, said the group's latest opinion poll told the story of a divided house, divided between those who support the IRG led by Hadi and those who support the STC. In principle Socotra's remoteness should have isolated it from the civil war on the mainland. However the presence of competing political parties have torn Socotra's social and political fabric apart.

The once peaceful island, situated near strategic shipping lanes linking Asia to Europe via the Red Sea and Suez Canal and famed for its rare and picturesque biodiversity, is a weak spot for all parties involved in the Yemen conflict, all of which have attempted to sneak their way into the hearts of the local population.

The Socotra Archipelago, in the northwest Indian Ocean near the Gulf of Aden, is 250 km long and comprises four islands and two rocky islets which appear as a prolongation of the Horn of Africa. The main island covers most of the archipelago. The site is of universal importance because of its biodiversity with rich and distinct flora and fauna: 37 per cent of Socotra's 825 plant species, 90 per cent of its reptile species and 95 per cent of its land snail species do not occur anywhere else in the world. The site also supports globally significant populations of land and sea birds (192 bird species, 44 of which breed on the islands while 85 are regular migrants), including a number of threatened species. The marine life of Socotra is also very diverse, with 253 species of reef-building corals, 730 species of coastal fish and 300 species of crab, lobster and shrimp.

But the conflicts on the island are preventing it from benefiting from its tourism potential as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. At the end of October UNESCO decided to send a mission to the island amid concerns over increasing threats to the archipelago's unique biodiversity. A nature reserve is now under the control of the STC. Yemen's delegate to UNESCO, Muhammad Jumaih, discussed plans to carry out a report on the state of the reserve, with Mechtild Rossler, the Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre. The Socotrans have resorted to using wood as fuel owing to a gas shortage which they blame on the STC.

The *Socotra Post* reported that 21 local and three international lawyers have joined a human rights group

CHRONOLOGY

Oct 17: The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) completes the last phase of a prisoner exchange deal, considered the largest between the internationally recognized government and the Houthis since the coup in late 2014.
-Hassan Irloo, Iran's new ambassador to Yemen, arrives in Sanaa.
Oct 18: Members of the Security Council call on the Houthis to immediately give access to UN experts to the decaying Safer tanker in the Red Sea.
-The Houthis say they are ready to exchange all prisoners with the Yemeni government, one day after the major prisoner swap between the two warring rivals, Anadolu Agency reports.
Oct 19: The coalition announces a Houthi-launched ballistic missile fell in the city of Sadah.
-The Yemeni government warns that Iran intends to send weapons and military expertise to the Houthis.
Oct 20: Residents of Aden are complaining of frequent internet outages at a time when the coronavirus pandemic has forced a shift to online work.
-The leader of Yemen's Houthi Ansarullah movement holds the United States and Western intelligence services responsible for the creation of Takfiri terrorist groups, saying France's external intelligence agency plays a significant role in this regard.
Oct 21: ABNA reports that the STC holds a military parade in Socotra.
-A UK minister criticizes the Houthis for blocking the delivery of aid to north Yemen.
Oct 22: ABNA reports that Qatar is considering sending an ambassador to Sanaa.
Oct 23: The World Bank announces in a report that the Houthis' ban on the circulation of new banknotes in its areas of control has caused serious repercussions to the country's economy which has been deteriorating owing to a drop in oil exports, the downsizing of humanitarian support and devastating torrential rain and flash floods.
Oct 24: A group of 16 Yemeni volunteers is seeking to prortray the war-torn country in a positive light by presenting its rich history and culture through its "Yemen as it used to be" website.
Oct 25: The internationally recognized government and the STC agree to put in place a "comprehensive and permanent" truce in the southern province of Abyan and other contested

(Continued on page 5)

working to file a lawsuit against Hadi's government over its failure in fulfilling its duty to protect the sovereignty of the archipelago as the UAE consolidates its influence.

Although Socotra is part of Yemen, the central government has done little to improve the lives of people on the island which has been plagued widespread poverty and economic underdevelopment. The UAE has been luring Socotra with promises of economic benefits, residents are provided free health care and work permits in Abu Dhabi, and many have been given UAE citizenship, gestures in return for naval facilities, but the island's rare flora and fauna and clear waters are at risk if such plans go ahead. Any unfettered increase in human and cargo traffic could be devastating for the environment.

STC military parade on Socotra

Since 2000, UAE humanitarian organizations such as the Emirates Red Crescent have played an active role in Socotra. The organization provided relief and aid in March 2000 after major floods damaged buildings and agriculture.

In 2015, when Cyclone Chapala and Cyclone Megh struck the island, the UAE sent an aid ship and plane carrying tons of food, blankets and tents. The following year it increased supplies to Socotra which had largely been abandoned and forgotten as the mainland was preoccupied with the civil war. A UAE military base was also established as part of the Arab coalition's intervention in the war.

When Emirati troops appeared on the island some Yemeni political factions accused the UAE of attempting to occupy Socotra and looting and ravaging the flora of the island. The deployment of military personnel to the island has increased since the STC takeover. Yemeni media reported that on September 28 STC fighters were transferred to Socotra aboard an Emirati ship. *Al Jazeera* reported that a private Emirati plane had operated four flights to Socotra transporting a number of European experts and UAE officers.

Middle East Monitor stated on October 2 that 600 Sudanese troops had arrived on the island. The *Socotra Post* mentioned the arrival of an Emirati ship suspected of unloading military and communications equipment. It is speculated that the shipments may be used to complete the construction of a military and intelligence base. There are concerns that Israel, which has normalized relations with the UAE and with Sudan, is working with the UAE to set up a spy base on Socotra.

ABNA News Agency reported on October 27 that the head of the STC militia in Socotra, Rafat al-Thaqali, met two officers, Lieutenant Mohammed Salem Ahmed Al-Jamhi and Lieutenant Khamis Saleh Saeed, on the islands of Abd al Kuri and Samaha where the UAE wants to establish military bases. UAE military leaders have also held extensive meetings with STC leaders on Socotra. The UAE is reportedly also trying to seduce citizens to sell their land to them. It is trying to acquire land through its delegate Abu Mubarak who has already bought large areas.

Scores of Yemeni tribal leaders and dignitaries have called for the removal of the STC forces and the checkpoints they established. STC forces have reportedly shot at demonstrators causing tension. *ABNA* reported that the people in the Sarhin area have accused the UAE of pushing the STC to seize their land to achieve its military interests, and there were a number of violent clashes between the residents and STC forces. In June the UAE reportedly established a joint operations room with the Israeli navy in the strategic Ras Quttainan area after displacing the people who lived there.

Issa Salem bin Yaqut, an Oman-based senior sheikh of Socotra, continues to campaign fiercely against the UAE's presence which he condemned in his testimony before the US Congress in October 2019. Bin Yaqut accused the UAE of allowing the Israelis onto the island amid rumours that they are seeking to establish a spy base. He also accused Riyadh and Abu Dhabi of "destroying the charming and rare environmental landmarks on Socotra and establishing military camps amid a terrible international silence."

Military activity on the island, the building of military bases, and conflict between the locals, the STC and the Emiratis has resulted in a lethal mix and Yemen's only haven of peace and natural wonder is now set to become an environmental and cultural tragedy as the traditional way of life is threatened by outsiders who trying to use the island to serve their own interests with scant regard for the wishes or welfare of the local inhabitants.

Friends of SOUTH YEMEN

FRIENDS OF SOUTH YEMEN (FOSY)
2 Firshill Road
Sheffield S4 7BB
United Kingdom
Tele: +44 7802 763711
Email: info@friendsof southyemen.org
Website: www.friendsofsouthyemen.org

Socotra In Pictures

Top: *Dragon's blood trees (Dracaena cinnabari)*
Above left: *Bottle tree (Dendrosicyos socotranus)* Above right: *Rocky mountain water pool*
Below: *Fishing boats off the Socotra coast*

Socotra In Pictures

Top: *Hadibo, the Socotran capital*

Above left: *Young Socotran girl*

Above right: *Balloon fish (Pic: Adventures with Nicole)*

Below: *Shuaab Beach*

Interview

Raafat Ali Ibrahim, the STC's man in Socotra, talks about recent developments on the island.

Question: ***Talk abounds about regional and strategic competition for Socotra. Parties affiliated with the government of Hadi and countries like Qatar and Turkey accuse the United Arab Emirates of controlling the island.***

Answer: The media of the Reform Party, the wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Yemen, talks about the presence of the UAE in Socotra which it accuses of looting. Sometimes they say that the Emiratis occupied the island. This is completely untrue. Socotra and the UAE have had a relationship for more than 70 years. The sons of Socotra emigrated to the Gulf countries and today they are living and working in the UAE. The presence of the UAE, which has benefited all aspects of life on the island, coincided with the formation of the Arab coalition.

Raafat Ali Ibrahim

In the health sector the UAE has built the Khalifa Hospital which it finances. Emergency cases are transported to the UAE for treatment and provision has been made for the care for more than 4,000 disabled people. The Ataya School has also been built and electricity has been provided free of charge to all the citizens through the construction of two power stations. More than 100 wells are now extending the water network to all villages and roads have been built in the eastern and western areas along with a fish factory. One hundred fishing boats were provided free of charge to local fishermen and football clubs have been financed. Local artistic groups have also been invited to festivals in the UAE.

Question: ***How do the Socotrans feel about the presence of political and military forces on the island? How has the STC helped them?***

Answer: The people want all conflicting forces to leave so they can deal calmly with their internal problems. They feel very comfortable after governor Ramzi Mahrous and the Reform Group stopped managing the archipelago and protested calling for them to depart. There are 18 electoral centres on the island and the people are managing the governorates.

We notice the intensification of the media campaign launched by the Qatari and Turkish media against the local administration of the island and the market of lies, because there is no significant acceptance of Qatar in Socotra. There was no prior relationship between Qatar and the island. As for the relationship of the sons of Socotra with the Turkish presence, it is completely non-existent. After the Reform Party group assumed power in the archipelago in recent years, a group of Socotran members of the Muslim Brotherhood went to study in Turkey.

Question: ***What are your plans for education, health and infrastructure?***

Answer: The Khalifa Humanitarian Foundation built the Khalifa Bin Zayed hospital and Saudi Arabia has established a field hospital. In the future we are seeking to develop Arab and international tourism through the development of the airport. The port will also be expanded for marine tourism. UNESCO, the Arab coalition and supporting countries will be consulted about establishing a university.

Attention also needs to be given to the unique environment and cultural heritage of the Socotra archipelago which will open the door to tourism and scientific evaluation of its biological diversity. The people have their own conservation measures regarding grazing and trees which are only cut down when necessary. The United Nations should provide greater assistance in preserving the status of Socotra as a natural reserve.

Question: ***Is there anything else you would like to tell us?***

Answer: The people of Socotra love their island and will not allow any invader to set foot on it or to separate it from the body of the southern land.

Interview: SPArabia

Riyadh Agreement the only game in town

Visit FOSY's web site to read our press release on the first anniversary of the signing of the Riyadh Agreement.
https://www.friendsofsouthyemen.org/press_releases/press_releases.php

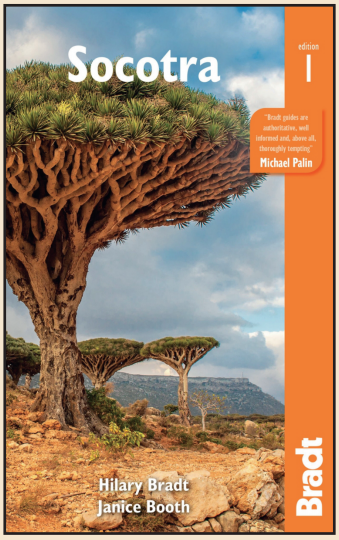
areas.
-A Houthi military spokesman says the Houthis have targeted Jizan and Abha airports and the Khamis Mushait base in Saudi Arabia with drones.
- The Omani Foreign Minister reviews latest developments in the Yemeni arena with the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Yemen, Martin Griffiths.
Oct 26: The UN failed to encourage the Houthis to allow it to contain the danger which could be caused by the explosion of the abandoned Safer oil tanker, Yemen's Minister of Information Muammar Al-Eryani says.
Oct 27: Hassan Zaid, the Houthis' minister of sport and youth, is killed in a shoot-out in Sanaa.
-Malnutrition among young children soars to the highest levels ever recorded in parts of war-torn Yemen, the UN says as coronavirus and shortfalls in aid funding worsen the humanitarian crisis.
Oct 28: Al-Akhbar reports that negotiations are underway between the Houthis and the Islah Party that holds the city of Marib. Qatar is the interlocutor in these talks.
-More than 130 bridges have been hit by air strikes between 2015 and 2019, according to data provided by the Yemeni Archive.
-A first-of-its-kind study conducted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine using satellite images to count fresh graves and analyse burial activity in Yemen has estimated that the death toll there from Covid-19 or related causes is far higher than official figures suggest.
-The coalition says it has seized a Hezbollah-linked shipment of drugs destined for the Houthis.
Oct 29: The Campaign Against the Arms Trade has filed for a judicial review to stop UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia.
-The Houthis are pressing ahead with a plan to recruit over 50,000 minors whom they failed in elementary and high school official exams in 2019.
Oct 30: The United States says it has seized a variety of missiles that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force shipped to Yemen, and announced the sale of Iranian oil it seized in August before it reached Venezuela, saying the proceeds will benefit victims of terrorism
-US officials warn of possible Houthi missile strikes on Riyadh, after the kingdom reported it intercepted several armed drones and missiles fired by the Houthis.
-The UK's Middle East Minister James Cleverly rules out the chances of a decisive military solution in Yemen and stresses that Britain encourages warring parties there to positively engage in UN-sponsored talks.
Oct 31: The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief) launches a campaign of insecticide spraying and raising of dengue fever awareness in Aden governorate with the support of the World Health Organization (WHO).

-The United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, urges Yemen's rival parties to "include women in the conflict negotiations".
Nov 1: The Yemeni army launches an attack on Houthi militia sites in northern Taiz.
Nov 2: Forces loyal to the internationally-recognized government clash with STC forces in the Al-Tiriya and Sheikh Salem areas in Abyan governorate.
Nov 3: Yemen's Information Minister, Muammar Al Eryani, says the Houthis must release all detained and abducted journalists without any conditions.
-The Yemeni government warns of possible leaks or even explosions from the oil tanker Safer abandoned off the port of Hudaydah which has been seized by the Houthis.
-Saudi Transport Minister Saleh bin Nasser Al-Jasser signs an MoU with the Saudi Development and Reconstruction Program for Yemen to develop land, sea, and air transport networks.
Nov 4: Yemen's currency tumbles to a record low of 840 riyals against the US dollar despite fresh measures by the country's central bank to bring the chaotic exchange system under its control.
Nov 5: The internationally recognized government's Prime Minister Ma'een Abdulmalik praises Saudi Arabia's continuous support, supervision, and follow-up to complete the mechanism for accelerating Riyadh Agreement implementation.
-Yemen's Health Minister Naser Baoom blames the Houthis for the resurgence of infant polio in the country, saying they have been spreading rumours against vaccination.
Nov 6: Coalition forces destroy two explosive-laden drones sent by Houthis.
-The SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties, a Geneva-based NGO, accuses the STC of committing human rights violations on Socotra.
-The Yemeni government accuses the Houthis of looting and smuggling more than 14,000 ancient manuscripts and artefacts.
-Nov 7: ABNA News Agency reports coalition jets have launched a series of airstrikes against residential areas in Yemen's Ma'rib and al-Jawf provinces.
-Four Yemeni journalists arbitrarily detained by Houthi militants since 2015 face death sentences and are being held in appalling conditions, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reveals.
Nov 8: The Houthis have asked for Iran's co-operation in developing Yemen's fishing industry.
-A diabetic eye screening at the centre in Inverness is collecting items for the Al-Sabeen Children's Hospital, in Sanaa, for children aged up to five years old.
-Yemen's national coronavirus committee announces recording zero coronavirus cases in the government-controlled provinces.

Crowd funding enables publication of Socotra guide book

Socotra is a unique island. And the first guide book to this island was financed in a unique way – through crowd funding.

During her lengthy career as a travel writer and founder of Bradt Travel Guides, Hilary Bradt (now 79) had visited some of the most spectacular destinations in the world. But Socotra, located 60 miles east of the Horn of Africa, remained firmly at the top of her wish list. When Bradt was finally able to visit the island with her colleague Janice Booth, aged 81, in February, it exceeded their expectations.



The pair were so impressed, they decided to ditch the short leaflet they had planned and produce the "first and only" guidebook to Socotra. Made up of enormous sand dunes, craggy mountains, beautiful beaches and unique wildlife, the Yemeni island is often referred to as the "Galapagos of the Indian Ocean."

But the impact of COVID 19 saw Bradt's sales drop by 75 per cent and there was no money to publish the Socotra guide. However, Bradt and Booth were determined to release the book in November of this year because of the political developments in Socotra, and raised the money through a crowd funding campaign. "I think this might be the first time any guidebook publisher has tried this route," Bradt said. The guide is out now and selling well.

Everything needed for a successful trip is covered, from pre-departure planning, getting there, tour operators and where to stay. There is plenty of background information on the history, people, language and culture, followed by a geographical breakdown covering everywhere from the capital Hadibo to Ayhaft Canyon National Park, Qaria Lagoon, Rosh Marine Protected Area, Homhil Reserve, Terbak village and Hoq cave, Qalansiyah, Diksam Plateau and the forest of Firhimin. There is also a section on vocabulary, an endemic wildlife check list and suggested sources of further information.

The archipelago has an exceptionally large number of endemic species. Of the 220 bird species recorded, 11 are endemic, including the relatively recently identified Socotra Buzzard. Closer to the ground, an estimated 307 plant species are endemic. More than 600 species of insects, some 100 land and freshwater molluscs, around 80 arachnids, some dozen myriapods, four land- and fresh-water crabs, 30 reptiles and 14 mammals are waiting for the tourist cameras.

All the land snails, 90% of the reptiles and about 60% of the spiders are unique to the archipelago. With its superb beaches and dramatically varied landscapes (mountains, forest, ravines, sand-dunes, beaches, caves) Socotra is a prime target for tourism, which will need handling with extreme care. Strict regulations are in force to preserve the island's natural heritage and much of it has protected status, but some unprotected land has already been sold to potential developers. This pristine and relatively unknown little island, so full of natural treasures, may be on the brink of a very different future.

This tiny paradise is now potentially under threat after it was recently pulled into the civil war that has beset mainland Yemen since 2015. It is feared that the island's rare endemic species, including surreal Dragon Blood trees endemic to Socotra and spectacular UNESCO-recognized landscapes, could be destroyed if political uncertainty prevents their protection. The future of the island hangs in the balance. Anyone who reads this guide book will be convinced that it must be preserved as an ecotourism destination.

Statement from the Friends of Socotra

The UK-based Friends of Socotra said in a statement what we have all been reading about Socotra in the news over the last few months is confusing, often contradictory and sometimes disturbing. We hope that the ability of Socotrans to sustain themselves in the years to come, is being adequately protected. It is the wish of us all that the Socotrans will be able to discuss and peacefully determine their future and that of their islands with minimal interference or pressure from any outside agency.

Web site: **https://www.friendsofsoqotra.org/**