

String of Pearls: Yemen Could be the Arab Hub of the Maritime Silk Road

With an Ansarallah takeover of Yemen, Asia's trade and connectivity projects could expand into some of the world's most strategic waterways

By [Pepe Escobar](#)

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The usual suspects tried everything against Yemen.

First, coercing it into ‘structural reform.’ When that didn’t work, they instrumentalized takfiri mercenaries. They infiltrated and manipulated the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), ISIS. They used US drones and occasional marines.

And then, in 2015, they went Total Warfare: a UN-backed rogue coalition started bombing and starving Yemenis into submission – with barely a peep from the denizens of the ‘rules-based international order.’

The coalition – House of Saud, Qatar, UAE, US, UK – for all practical purposes, embarked on a final solution for Yemen.

Sovereignty and unity were never part of the deal. Yet soon the project stalled. Saudis and Emiratis were fighting each other for primacy in southern and eastern Yemen using mercenaries. In April 2017, Qatar clashed with both Saudis and Emiratis. The coalition started to unravel.

Now we reach a crucial inflexion point. Yemeni Armed Forces and allied fighters from Popular Committees, backed by a coalition of tribes, including the very powerful Murad, are on the verge of liberating strategic, oil and natural gas-rich Marib – the last stronghold of the House of Saud-backed mercenary army.

Tribal leaders are in the capital Sanaa talking to the quite popular Ansarallah movement to organize a peaceful takeover of Marib. So this process is in effect the result of a wide-ranging national interest deal between the Houthis and the Murad tribe.

The House of Saud, for its part, is allied with the collapsing forces behind former president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, as well as political parties such as Al-Islah, Yemen’s Muslim

Brotherhood. They have been incapable of resisting Ansarallah.

A repeat scenario is now playing in the western coastal port of Hodeidah, where takfiri mercenaries have vanished from the province's southern and eastern districts.

Yemen's Defense Minister Mohammad al-Atefi, talking to Lebanon's *al-Akhbar* newspaper, stressed that, "according to strategic and military implications...we declare to the whole world that the international aggression against Yemen has already been defeated."

It's not a done deal yet - but we're getting there.

Hezbollah, via its Executive Council Chairman Hashim Safieddine, adds to the context, stressing how the current diplomatic crisis between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia is directly linked to Mohammad bin Salman's (MbS) fear and impotence when confronted with the liberation of strategic Marib and Hezbollah's unwavering support for Yemen throughout the war.

A fabricated 'civil war'

So how did we get here?

Venturing beyond the [excellent analysis](#) by Karim Shami here on *The Cradle*, some geoeconomic background is essential to understanding what's really going on in Yemen.

For at least half a millennium before the Europeans started to show up, the ruling classes in southern Arabia built the area into a prime hub of intellectual and commercial exchange. Yemen became the prized destination of Prophet Muhammad's descendants; by the 11th century they had woven solid spiritual and intellectual links with the wider world.

By the end of the 19th century, as noted in Isa Blumi's outstanding *Destroying Yemen* (University of California Press, 2018), a "remarkable infrastructure that harnessed seasonal rains to produce a seemingly endless amount of wealth attracted no longer just disciples and descendants of prophets, but aggressive agents of capital seeking profits."

Soon we had Dutch traders venturing on terraced hills covered in coffee beans clashing with Ottoman Janissaries from Crimea, claiming them for the Sultan in Istanbul.

By the post-modern era, those "aggressive agents of capital seeking profits" had reduced Yemen to one of the advanced battlegrounds of the toxic mix between neoliberalism and Wahhabism.

The Anglo-American axis, since the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, promoted, financed and instrumentalized an essentialist, ahistorical version of 'Islam' that was simplistically reduced to Wahhabism: a deeply reactionary social engineering movement led by an antisocial front based in Arabia.

That operation shaped a shallow version of Islam sold to western public opinion as antithetical to universal - as in 'rules-based international order' - values. Hence, essentially anti-progressive. Yemen was at the frontline of this cultural and historical perversion.

Yet the promoters of the war unleashed in 2015 - a gloomy celebration of humanitarian

imperialism, complete with carpet bombing, embargoes, and widespread forced starvation – did not factor in the role of the Yemeni Resistance. Much as it happened with the Taliban in Afghanistan.

The war was a perverse manipulation by US, UK, French, Israeli and minions Saudi, Emirati and Qatari intel agencies. It was never a ‘civil war’ – as the hegemonic narrative goes – but an engineered project to reverse the gains of Yemen’s own ‘Arab Spring.’

The target was to return Yemen back to a mere satellite in Saudi Arabia’s backyard. And to ensure that Yemenis never dare to even dream of regaining their historic role as the economic, spiritual, cultural and political reference for a great deal of the Indian Ocean universe.

Add to the narrative the simplistic trope of blaming Shia Iran for supporting the Houthis. When it was clear that coalition mercenaries would fail to stop the Yemeni Resistance, a new narrative was birthed: the war was important to provide ‘security’ for the Saudi hacienda facing an ‘Iran-backed’ enemy.

That’s how Ansarallah became cast as Shia Houthis fighting Saudis and local ‘Sunni’ proxies. Context was thrown to the dogs, as in the vast, complex differences between Muslims in Yemen – Sufis of various orders, Zaydis (Houthis, the backbone of the Ansarallah movement, are Zaydis), Ismailis, and Shafii Sunnis – and the wider Islamic world.

Yemen goes BRI

So the whole Yemen story, once again, is essentially a tragic chapter of Empire attempting to plunder Third World/Global South wealth.

The House of Saud played the role of vassals seeking rewards. They do need it, as the House of Saud is in desperate financial straits that include subsidizing the US economy via mega-contracts and purchasing US debt.

The bottom line: the House of Saud won’t survive unless it dominates Yemen. The future of MBS is totally leveraged on winning *his* war, not least to pay his bills for western weapons and technical assistance already used. There are no definitive figures, but according to a western intel source close to the House of Saud, that bill amounted to at least \$500 billion by 2017.

The stark reality made plain by the alliance between Ansarallah and major tribes is that Yemen refuses to surrender its national wealth to subsidize the Empire’s desperate need of liquidity, collateral for new infusions of cash, and thirst for commodities. Stark reality has absolutely nothing to do with the imperial narrative of Yemen as ‘pre-modern tribal traditions’ averse to change, thus susceptible to violence and mired in endless ‘civil war.’

And that brings us to the enticing ‘another world is possible’ angle when the Yemeni Resistance finally extricates the nation from the grip of the hawkish, crumbling neoliberal/Wahhabi coalition.

As the Chinese very well know, Yemen is rich not only in the so far unexplored oil and gas reserves, but also in gold, silver, zinc, copper and nickel.

Beijing also knows all there is to know about the ultra-strategic Bab al Mandab between

Yemen's southwestern coast and the Horn of Africa. Moreover, Yemen boasts a series of strategically located Indian Ocean ports and Red Sea ports on the way to the Mediterranean, such as Hodeidah.



These waterways practically scream Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and especially the Maritime Silk Road – with Yemeni ports complementing China's only overseas naval base in Djibouti, where roads and railways connect to Ethiopia.

The Ansarallah-tribal alliance may even, in the medium to long term, exercise full control for access to the Suez Canal.

One very possible scenario is Yemen joining the 'string of pearls' – ports linked by the BRI across the Indian Ocean. There will, of course, be major pushback by proponents of the 'Indo-Pacific' agenda. That's where the Iranian connection enters the picture.

BRI in the near future will feature the progressive interconnection between the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – with a special role for the port of Gwadar – and the emerging China-Iran corridor that will traverse Afghanistan. The port of Chabahar in Iran, only 80 km away from Gwadar, will also bloom, whether by definitive commitments by India or a possible future takeover by China.

Warm links between Iran and Yemen will translate into renewed Indian Ocean trade, without Sanaa depending on Tehran, as it is essentially self-sufficient in energy and already manufactures its own weapons. Unlike the Saudi vassals of Empire, Iran will certainly invest in the Yemeni economy.

The Empire will not take any of this lightly. There are plenty of similarities with the Afghan scenario. Afghanistan is now set to be integrated into the New Silk Roads – a commitment shared by the SCO. Now it's not so far-fetched to picture Yemen as a SCO observer, integrated to BRI and profiting from Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) packages. Stranger things have happened in the ongoing Eurasia saga.

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Pepe Escobar, born in Brazil, is a correspondent and editor-at-large at Asia Times and columnist for Consortium News and Strategic Culture in Moscow. Since the mid-1980s he's lived and worked as a foreign correspondent in London, Paris, Milan, Los Angeles, Singapore, Bangkok. He has extensively covered Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia to China, Iran, Iraq and the wider Middle East. Pepe is the author of Globalistan – How the Globalized World is Dissolving into Liquid War; Red Zone Blues: A Snapshot of Baghdad during the Surge. He was contributing editor to The Empire and The Crescent and Tutto in Vendita in Italy. His last two books are Empire of Chaos and 2030. Pepe is also associated with the Paris-based European Academy of Geopolitics. When not on the road he lives between Paris and Bangkok.

He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: If Ansarallah and the Yemeni army win this war, Yemen could emerge as the region's main Arab maritime hub Photo Credit: The Cradle

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