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Eastern Yemen's Tribal Model for Containing Conflict

Ahmed Nagi

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Publications Department
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
P: + 1 202 483 7600
F: + 1 202 483 1840
CarnegieEndowment.org

Carnegie Middle East Center
Emir Bechir Street, Lazarieh Tower
Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061
Riad El Solh, Lebanon
P: + 961 1 99 15 91
F: + 961 1 99 15 91
Carnegie-MEC.org

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Summary

The tribes of Mahra, a part of eastern Yemen that borders Oman, adhere to a code of conduct that has helped the area's inhabitants mediate disputes and contain conflict at key points in the region's history. This has ensured a degree of stability for Mahra even in times of war. Today, as the war in Yemen continues, the region is the site of a power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Oman. The Mahri code of conduct has enabled the region to escape the worst excesses of the war and to limit Saudi influence there. Though often overlooked, the Mahri approach could offer lessons in defusing tensions between the warring parties elsewhere in conflict-ridden Yemen.

Key Themes

- Mahra's geographic location, particularly the fact that it borders Oman to the east, has shaped its traditions and social mores.
- During two insurgencies that engulfed Mahra in the 1960s and 1970s, several Mahri tribal traditions coalesced into a code of conduct, which helped locals broker settlements and contain conflict.
- By holding fast to their code of conduct throughout Yemen's current civil war, the Mahris have averted sustained conflict among themselves despite being divided into pro-Omani and pro-Saudi factions. The code has also helped the tribes limit Saudi Arabia's ability to impose its will on the region following Riyadh's major military intervention.

Recommendations

- **Better understand the history of eastern Yemen and the key role that tribal loyalties have played in historical disputes in the region.** Mahri tribal loyalties have helped defuse multiple disputes and conflicts in recent decades, including the Dhofar rebellion in neighboring Oman in the 1960s and 1970s.
- **Relearn how key characteristics of Mahri tribal identity have helped the region mediate disputes and blunt conflict under certain conditions.** The tribal loyalties of Mahra, especially the tendencies to embrace supratribal unity and abstain from or limit intratribal violence at key junctures, have sometimes helped end conflicts and sometimes kept them from getting far worse.

- **Explore avenues for various other tribes of Yemen to rediscover and adopt practices similar to the Mahri code of conduct as a potential means of reducing or at least managing conflict.** For all their ethnoregional particularities, the Mahris remain similar in culture, outlook, and social organization to Yemenis in other regions of the country. Indeed, the Mahri code of conduct rests on five particular traditions that relate to conflict management and that also figure, individually or in some combination, in the tribal cultures of the Himyaris, the Hamdanis, and the Mathhajis.

An Island of Relative Tranquility

The civil war in Yemen, which erupted in 2014 and was exacerbated in 2015 by a Saudi-led military intervention, has ravaged large swaths of the country and torn asunder much of its social fabric. As of October 2019, the war has claimed 100,000 lives nationwide and has displaced more than 3.6 million people.¹ The Yemeni governorate of Mahra has been dragged into the civil war by a combination of the conflict's internal dynamics and Saudi Arabia's regional rivalry with both Iran and Oman. However, in Mahra, only a handful of people have been killed as of January 2019, and "tens of thousands" of people displaced from elsewhere in the country have sought to move there.²

In 2017, two years into the Saudi-led military intervention aimed at restoring to power ousted Yemeni President Abed Rabbu Mansour Hadi and securing Saudi Arabia's border with Yemen, a new phase of the war began. The Saudis claimed that Oman was using Mahra to facilitate Iran's arming of the Houthis rebels. By dispatching armed forces to Mahra, the Saudis sought to curb the arming of the Houthis, counter increased Omani influence in the governorate, and gain strategic access to the Arabian Sea. The Saudis' heavy-handed move in the face of Oman's preferred soft power approach divided Mahri society, which—like much of Yemen—is tribal in structure. Several tribes experienced internal splits owing to members' opposing views regarding the Saudi intervention.³ (See map 1)

Occasional violence erupted over the Saudi intervention in Mahra—both between the Saudi forces and the Mahri tribes and among tribes. Two incidents proved particularly serious.⁴ In November 2018, two armed members of an anti-Saudi tribe were killed by Saudi-backed forces in the Firtek Tunnel by Hasween. In April 2019, a skirmish between the Saudi-backed Mahri governor's security detail and Mahri tribesmen at a checkpoint the tribesmen had set up in an area known as Lubaib resulted in injuries on both sides.

Similar violent incidents in other parts of Yemen have led to protracted fighting. In Mahra, however, the two opposing camps averted such an outcome. They were able to do this by adhering to an unwritten code of conduct, one that ensures that simmering tensions and even violent flareups do

MAP 1

Mahra in Eastern Yemen



not escalate into large-scale, drawn-out armed confrontations.⁵ This code helps curtail conflict in part because it tends to encourage supratribal solidarity and discourages intratribal violence. Mahra's isolated location along the border with Oman may have also helped dampen violence in the region, but other sparsely populated places along the border with Saudi Arabia have displayed less social cohesion and greater violence by comparison. Though it has gone largely unnoticed by Yemenis elsewhere and other external participants in the country's civil war so far, the code holds lessons for how the high costs of such conflicts can be reduced, at least in part.

The Mahri Code of Conduct

The Mahri code of conduct rests on five tribal traditions. First, Mahri solidarity is supratribal. Although the tribes of Mahra often engage in disputes among themselves, which can be exploited by outside parties, external actors are granted only so much leeway when operating within the Mahri sphere. If and when an outside player engages in direct aggression against a Mahri tribe or individual, most Mahris, irrespective of tribal affiliation, tend to close ranks against the outsider.

Second, among the Mahris, blood is thicker than water: intratribal divisions cannot justify strife, and violence against other Mahris remains highly taboo. Indeed, although violence between Mahri tribes, while rare, is not unheard of, violence between clans or subgroups of the same tribe is almost inconceivable.⁶ Paradoxically, then, splits within tribes militate against violence more than divisions among tribes do. This or that clan or faction of a Mahri tribe may ally itself politically with an outside party, but it will remain strongly disinclined to use force on behalf of outsiders.

Third, in Mahri culture, bearing arms does not necessarily mean using them. If a Mahri tribe wishes to signal its fighting prowess to other tribes or to outsiders, it will often organize a quasi-military procession. This is a way for the tribe to demonstrate that it is equipped to prosecute a war that would exact a heavy toll on its opponents. In certain cases, these displays have tended to reduce the chances of organized violence by impressing upon adversaries, including influential tribal elders wielding decisionmaking powers, the costs of conflict and the wisdom of compromise.

Fourth, when armed conflict between Mahri tribes does occur, the spoils do not go to the victor. On the contrary, the onus of achieving reconciliation falls upon the party that emerges victorious, which is obliged to financially compensate its vanquished adversary for its losses. This creates a material disincentive to engage another tribe in open conflict, even if the chances of victory are high. For example, former Omani sultan Qaboos bin Said eventually demonstrated this tradition on the advice of Mahri leaders after the Dhofar rebellion. In Mahri culture, military victory is onerous.

Fifth, intratribal mediation tends to discourage violence or at least limit its scope. When disputes between tribal units arise, tribal leaders tend to act as intermediaries between the quarreling factions to ease tensions and help them resolve disputes before they come to blows in any severe way.

To understand how separate tribal traditions congealed into a larger code of conduct, which helps serve to limit or contain conflict, a brief overview of the modern history of Mahra and its people is necessary. Mahra's geographic location, particularly the border it shares with Oman to the east, has shaped its traditions and social mores. Indeed, the Mahri code of conduct evolved in large part as a sociopolitical response to two insurgencies—one in then nascent South Yemen and the other in Oman—that engulfed the Mahris' home territory in the southern Arabian Peninsula during the 1960s and 1970s.

Forged in the Crucible of Conflict

Beginning in 1432, the largely tribal Mahra Sultanate enjoyed full or partial independence for over five centuries. Indeed, it managed to retain an autonomous status even during the final eight decades of its existence (1886–1967), a period during which it was mostly part of the Aden Protectorate established by the British. (For much of the five centuries in question, the Socotra archipelago, which lies in the Indian Ocean, also fell under the sultanate's rule.) When the British withdrew in 1967, Mahra became part of South Yemen, which merged with its northern counterpart in 1990 to create the present-day Republic of Yemen.

The sultanate's longevity enhanced a regional identity and a set of ethnocultural bonds among Mahra's inhabitants that transcended tribal divisions: the Mahris speak Mahri, a Semitic language distinct from Arabic, and they rarely marry non-Mahris. By the time British rule began to falter in the early 1960s, Mahri supratribal solidarity was very evident. Yet it was during the mid-1960s that the code of conduct that characterizes the Mahris today took shape—out of the Aden Emergency (alternatively known as the Radfan Uprising)—an armed conflict that hastened the end of British rule in the southern Arabian Peninsula—as well as the Dhofar rebellion in nearby Oman.

In 1963, a pro-independence Marxist militant group called the National Liberation Front (NLF) launched an insurgency campaign against the British. The resulting conflict, termed the Radfan Uprising by the NLF and the Aden Emergency by the British, lasted four years. From the start, the NLF carried out a number of operations against targets in the Aden Protectorate, which contained the Mahri heartland. In addition to responding forcefully, the British attempted to consolidate their hold on the region administratively by dissolving the Aden Protectorate and incorporating Mahra

into the newly established Protectorate of South Arabia. Yet neither the iron fist nor the administrative shakeup succeeded in stemming the tide of rebellion, and soon the British had no recourse but to prepare an exit strategy.

During this fraught period, the NLF set its sights on the rulers and other pillars of the various southern Arabian protectorates, whom it considered little more than British stooges. The NLF onslaught amounted to an existential crisis for the Mahris. Their sultan was under attack, their autonomy was threatened with revocation, and their ethnocultural identity was viewed as irredeemably intertwined with imperialism. The Mahris understood that their future as a distinct community with the latitude to run its affairs was imperiled. At the same time, they knew that they lacked the military firepower to prevent an NLF takeover of their territory once the British were gone.

Help arrived from unexpected quarters. Beginning in 1963, a trickle of Mahri youth, several of whom had returned after being radicalized and embracing Marxism in Kuwait, joined the NLF.⁷ In spite of ideological disagreements due to their Marxist beliefs, these young people maintained strong links to their people in Mahra. These Mahris would categorically refuse to fight their kith and kin, owing to the prohibition on tribal—especially intratribal—conflict.

Nevertheless, with the withdrawal of the British in 1967, the position of the sultan of Mahra, Issa bin Ali bin Afrar, became exceedingly vulnerable. That same year, the NLF seized control of Mahra, captured the sultan along with several of his high-ranking advisers, and seized his and his clan's property. Following a trial in an NLF-appointed court, several of the sultan's companions were found guilty of various offenses and executed. The sultan himself was sentenced to long-term imprisonment.⁸

These executions and the sultan's imprisonment came as a tremendous blow to the Mahris. By itself, the outcry of ordinary Mahris might not have registered with their oppressors. However, rising discontent among more influential Mahri members of the NLF had an impact. By 1968, influential Mahris in the NLF's ranks were able to encourage the organization's leadership to reshape its policies vis-à-vis Mahra. Within a year of imprisoning the sultan and abolishing the sultanate, the NLF released him from custody.⁹ (Shorn of power and ailing, he would die not long thereafter.) Moreover, although the NLF had incorporated Mahra into the newly established People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (commonly referred to as South Yemen), it appointed Mohammed Akkosh as the region's first governor. Akkosh was among the initial crop of Mahris who had joined the NLF in 1963.¹⁰ In the newly established country of South Yemen under NLF rule, he and other high-ranking Mahris within the NLF would moderate the group's approach to Mahra and guarantee limited autonomy for their home territory.

The next test for the Mahri came in 1965 with the eruption of the Dhofar rebellion in neighboring Oman, which started as a localized, low-level series of clashes. The rebellion pitted disaffected tribes in the marginalized Omani region of Dhofar (which borders Yemen's Mahra) against the Muscat-based regime of then sultan Said bin Taimur in Oman. But the Dhofar rebellion then morphed into a larger conflict that drew in several nearby countries. By 1968, the main rebel group was calling itself the Popular Front for the Liberation of Dhofar and the Gulf (PFLOAG) and receiving assistance from the NLF in neighboring South Yemen, with which the rebels shared a Marxist outlook. PFLOAG guerrillas established a military presence in Mahra, from which they launched cross-border attacks on Omani forces. The civilians in Mahra often bore the brunt of the Omani retaliation that followed such incursions.¹¹

The PFLOAG's use of Mahra as its military staging ground, together with lingering resentment toward the NLF, which now governed South Yemen and supported the PFLOAG, impelled many Mahris to cross the border and join the Omani forces battling the rebels. This trend accelerated after 1970, when Taimur was overthrown by his son, Qaboos, who sought to cultivate close ties with Mahris in Oman as well as those—the vast majority—that reside in Yemen.¹² By this time, the Omani military was receiving aid from Iran, the United Kingdom, and other countries. Still, the Mahris' knowledge of the terrain and local demographics proved invaluable in helping turn the tide against the rebels.¹³

The Mahris who aided the Omani war effort also wound up benefiting their people. They were able to lobby Qaboos to spare Mahra from large-scale and often devastating retaliatory strikes, despite the region's extensive use by the South Yemen-backed Dhofari insurgents. Thus, though caught amid an increasingly brutal war with regional and even international dimensions, Mahra escaped the worst of it.

When Oman finally quashed the Dhofar rebellion in early 1976, the Mahris who had fought alongside the Omani military and its allies found themselves on the winning side of the conflict. At first, it was not at all clear how the Omani state, led by Qaboos, would treat the vanquished Dhofaris. Punitive measures were a distinct possibility. In line with their tradition that the victor must bear the onus of achieving reconciliation, however, several Mahris with newfound influence in Oman urged the sultan to eschew vengeance and instead try to effect a rapprochement between the two sides. Qaboos, whose mother hailed from Dhofar, proved receptive to the idea and heeded the Mahris' advice. Qaboos had an interest in deepening positive ties with the Mahris and the Dhofaris to make conditions along the border with Oman more stable and peaceful. To that end, one prominent member of the Dhofar uprising, Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, would eventually become Qaboos's longtime foreign minister starting in the late 1990s.

For both Oman and the Dhofaris, the results were positive. The sultan launched economic development programs and ceded limited political autonomy to Dhofar. This cushioned the blow of defeat among the Dhofaris and better integrated their region into the Omani state. Once again, the Mahris had succeeded in leveraging their position to mitigate the severity of a conflict. The relationship between Sultan Qaboos and the Mahris deepened. Moreover, his receptivity to their traditions would have implications for the situation in Mahra decades later, during the ongoing Yemeni civil war.

Mahra and Yemen's Current Civil War

In November 2017, the civil war in Yemen entered a new phase. Until then, Saudi Arabian military forces had focused their energies on the governorates of Sadah, Jawf, and Hadramawt. Now, in their capacity as the leading element of an Arab coalition that included the United Arab Emirates and other countries, they moved into Mahra and quickly seized key facilities. The Saudis sought to counter increased Omani influence in Mahra, particularly given their conviction that Oman was allowing Iran to use both its territory and that of adjoining Mahra to funnel arms to the Houthi rebels. Additionally, the Saudis wanted access to the Arabian Sea, on whose shores they could construct a port and create a shipping route for oil exports that would bypass Iranian navy patrols in the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁴

From the start, several Mahri tribes vocally opposed the Saudi intervention. At issue was the blatant nature of the outside interference in Mahra's affairs as well as the fear that the Saudis sought to encroach on Mahra's vitally important link to Oman. The relationship between Oman and the Mahris, which took shape during the Dhofar rebellion, had solidified over the ensuing decades; during this period, the Omanis deepened their familiarity with Mahri ways, including the Mahri code of conduct. Following the signing of a border agreement with Yemen in 1992, Oman went so far as to grant citizenship to some Mahris and made it easier for many others to move to Oman.¹⁵ Yemen's civil war has brought the two sides even closer together. Mahra's economic stability today owes much to its ability to secure fuel and food from Oman; meanwhile Muscat increasingly has coordinated with Mahri tribes on border security as the Yemeni state has disintegrated.

Unwelcome to begin with, the Saudis made the situation even worse for themselves by attempting to impose their ways on the Mahri people. For example, they established Salafi religious centers in the areas of Qishen and Ghayda for the purpose of indoctrinating local youth. Given that Sufi forms of Islam have long held sway in Mahra and that Salafism is the politically dominant strain of Islam in

Saudi Arabia, this initiative was met with stiff opposition among Mahris, much of it notably spearheaded by women.¹⁶ The Saudis encountered similarly negative popular reactions when it became clear that they were aiming to reorient all state institutions in Mahra to reflect Saudi prerogatives and policies.

Initial Saudi attempts to forestall opposition proved ham-fisted. In a particularly illustrative example, Saudis trucked some of its native Mahris into Yemen. The Saudis brought Mahri tribal elders across the border from areas like Kharkhir and Sharurah in Saudi Arabia to Mahra and appointed them to key positions in the Yemeni governorate's newly reorganized state institutions.¹⁷ Yet this made no difference, as the individuals in question were viewed by the Yemeni Mahris as having subverted the principle that blood is thicker than water—many of the inhabitants of Mahra perceived these outsiders as interlopers.

Having failed to dictate terms to the Mahris in this way, the Saudis decided to try their hand at splitting the tribes and controlling them from within. In this endeavor, they met a measure of success. For the most part, they capitalized on the existence of tribal subgroups that were marginalized, resentful of Omani influence in Mahra, or a combination of the two. In at least one case, they simply bribed people en masse.¹⁸ Before long, two of the other largest Mahri subtribes—the Belhafs and the Samodahs—had each split into two factions, one opposing the Saudis and the other supporting them.¹⁹

These achievements gave the Saudis a foothold in Mahri society. Yet, given the Mahri code of conduct, even those Mahris who were now allied with the Saudis would go only so far in foisting a Saudi agenda on their tribal kin. The irony is that, precisely because the Saudis succeeded in their immediate goal of splitting several tribes, they failed to attain their larger objective of using allied tribal subgroups as a means of asserting control over the tribes in their entirety. The Mahri prohibition on intratribal strife served to stymie the Saudis.

The Harizi affair provides a good example. In April 2018, inhabitants of Ghayda staged protests in which they called upon Saudi forces to leave Mahra.²⁰ Saudi Arabia responded by establishing a Saudi-Mahri mediation committee tasked with facilitating a handover of the city's main institutions to locals in return for a suspension of the protests. Yet before the committee had even finished deliberating, Hadi, who was operating out of the Saudi capital of Riyadh, dismissed Abdullah bin Kudda from his post as Mahra's governor and replaced him with staunch Saudi ally Rageh Bakrit.²¹ Hadi also dismissed three key local security officials known for sympathizing with the protesters, replacing them with Saudi loyalists. The Mahris took to the streets once more. They were joined by the security officials Hadi had dismissed, including former head of border security Ali Salem al-Harizi, who assumed a leading role in the galvanized protests.

When the security forces of Mahra, now firmly in the grip of Saudi Arabia, issued an arrest warrant for Harizi, Mahri indignation was palpable. Particularly telling was the reaction of pro-Saudi Mahris from tribes other than Harizi's own (which, as it happens, carries the same name). Despite their differences with Harizi, these pro-Saudi Mahris felt that the Saudis had overstepped. In a show of supratribal solidarity, one of the tenets of the Mahri code of conduct in such instances, hundreds of men from various Mahri tribes marched alongside Harizi when he publicly condemned the issuing of the arrest warrant.²² Moreover, Harizi was now regularly accompanied by a large convoy consisting of dozens of armed men in pickup trucks, several of which had been repurposed for military use as he travelled throughout Mahra.²³ Among the Mahris, bearing arms does not mean using them, but it does serve to impress upon one's adversaries the advisability of compromise. In a matter of days, the Saudis moved into damage-control mode: the spokesperson of the Saudi-led Arab coalition in Yemen went so far as to deny the existence of a warrant for Harizi's arrest.²⁴ In the face of Mahri supratribal solidarity and a roving display of arms, the Saudis reversed their position.

Another incident that highlighted the limits of Saudi influence on Riyadh's own Mahri allies was the Hasween Tunnel clash. In November 2018, Saudi-backed Yemeni security forces opened fire on an anti-Saudi demonstration in and around the Hasween Tunnel, killing two protesters.²⁵ Violence against Mahris perpetrated by outsiders is a red line necessitating a demonstration of supratribal solidarity. Sure enough, as with the Harizi incident, condemnation of the security forces' behavior was swift and emanated from all sectors of Mahri society, including pro-Saudi quarters.²⁶

Moreover, the General Council of the Governorate of Mahra and Socotra, a body of tribal and community leaders, convened an extraordinary session to discuss the incident. The council issued a statement that condemned the conduct of the Saudi-backed security forces in the strongest terms, rejected their description of the victims as arms and drug smugglers, insisted that the culprits (labeled "killers" in the statement) be brought to justice, and reaffirmed the right of civilians to engage in peaceful protest.²⁷ The statement had the desired effect; the Saudis investigated the incident and put the culprits on trial.²⁸ In other words, the Saudis were forced to observe one of the tenets of the Mahri code of conduct: after an armed clash occurs, the onus of reconciliation falls upon the victor.

Ultimately, in obliging the Saudis to at least partly adjust to the Mahri code of conduct, and in tamping down conflict between all parties, the Mahris demonstrated a measure of agency and asserted themselves as co-masters of their destiny. Unlike the Omanis, the Saudis initially ran roughshod over local norms. Before long, however, they were forced to backtrack. The Saudis realized that the only way to wield real influence in Mahra was to ally themselves with local tribes or subtribal clans. Yet to gain the acceptance of these groups, the Saudis had to adhere to their rules, or at least not overtly violate them.

Mahri Code of Conduct's Untapped Potential for Reducing Conflict

The Mahri experience with the Saudis has implications for the rest of Yemen. A rediscovery of the country's localized traditions of conflict resolution could help Yemenis manage and hopefully even curb the worst excesses of violence in their war-torn country. For all their ethnoregional particularities, the Mahris (and the tradition-based code they hold) remain similar in culture, outlook, and social organization to several of Yemen's other tribes. Indeed, the five traditions that undergird the Mahri code of conduct figure, individually or in some combination, in the tribal cultures of the Himyaris (who consider the Mahris an offshoot),²⁹ the Hamdanis, and the Mathhajis. If the country's other various tribes were to restore and elevate at least some forms of traditional conflict mediation that mirror the Mahris' practices, they might succeed in blunting Saudi influence and perhaps even securing some measure of respite for war-ravaged regions, whether or not these efforts result in a full cessation of hostilities.

The Mahri code of conduct, which has helped blunt conflict and mediate disputes at various points in Yemen's history, has demonstrated its value and utility time and again. The most recent example is the ongoing Yemeni civil war. Amid this conflict, Mahra remains relatively peaceful and economically stable compared to most other parts of the country.³⁰

Yet, so far, few Yemen observers seem to have taken heed. Even those invested in conflict resolution have neglected to consider the feasibility and the advantages of working with Yemen's tribes to replicate or at least learn from the Mahri approach elsewhere in the country. Instead, they have looked farther afield for models worthy of emulation. Given the demonstrably greater cultural and tribal commonalities between the Mahris and other Yemenis, the Mahri method of managing and containing conflict has untapped potential to perhaps curb the worst excesses of the country's long, costly civil war.

About the Author

Ahmed Nagi is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, where his research centers on Yemen.

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Notes

Note: This publication is based on primary fieldwork and interviews conducted by the author between November 2018 and October 2019, as well as analysis of secondary sources.

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- 15 Author’s interviews with several Mahris who hold Omani nationality, Mahra, Yemen, April 2019.
- 16 Nagi, “Oman’s Boiling Yemeni Border.”
- 17 Author’s observation based on extensive field research.
- 18 Author’s interview with two tribesmen recruited in this manner, Ghayda, Yemen, April 2019.
- 19 Author’s personal observations of the Mahri tribal scene between November 2017 and November 2019. It should be noted, however, that the Saudis failed to establish a body that would rival the influential General Council of the Sons of the Governorates of Mahra and Socotra. On the ultimately unsuccessful Saudi plan, see “Masdar li ‘Arabi 21’: Mukhattat Saudi li Darb Tayyar Mu‘arid laha bi’l-Yaman” [Source to ‘Arabi 21’: A Saudi plan to strike a current opposed to it in Yemen], March 7, 2019, <https://arabi21.com/story/1165007/باليمن-لها-معارض-تيار-لضرب-سعودي-مخطط-عربي-21-لمصدر>.
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Emir Bechir Street, Lazariéh Tower | Bldg. No. 2026 1210, 5th flr.
Downtown Beirut, P.O.Box 11-1061 | Riad El Solh, Lebanon
P: + 961 1 99 15 91

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