

Terrorism Monitor

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p.1

Brian M. Perkins

BRIEFS

p.3

Ben Abboudi

**Down But Not Out:
al-Qaeda and the
Algerian Protest
Movement**

p.5

Sudha Ramachandran

**Sri Lankan Suicide
Bombings: Islamic
State’s Deadly Input**

p.7

Rafid Jaboori

**Governor of Socotra
Vows to Confront UAE
and Allies**

ISLAMIC STATE SIGNAL RESILIENCE AND SHIFTING STRATEGY

Brian M. Perkins

Over the past several weeks, Islamic State (IS) has firmly demonstrated that it has entered the next phase of its global insurgency. The collapse of Baghouz, the last piece of the group’s caliphate to fall, has prompted a scattershot of developments and attacks across the world as the group looks to solidify its prominence, and find other fertile ground as IS fighters return to their home countries. On April 18, IS claimed responsibility for an attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the first under the banner of Islamic State Central Africa Province ([Twitter.com/SimNasr](https://twitter.com/SimNasr), April 18). On April 21, Easter Sunday, suicide bombers conducted a series of attacks on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka, killing at least 253 people ([Sunday Times](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/28/sri-lanka-suicide-bombings), April 28). On April 29, IS claimed responsibility for a bombing that reportedly injured three police officers, its first claimed attack in Dhaka since 2017 ([Daily Star](https://www.dailystar.com.bd/news/2019/04/29/is-claims-responsibility-for-bombing-in-dhaka), April 30). These widespread developments point to a threat that is equally as deadly but now more diffuse.

Even when IS still controlled territory in Iraq and Syria, the group was slowly preparing for this phase, urging fighters to join its other *wilayat* (provinces) rather than traveling to Syria—a sign of the group’s self-awareness about its inevitable defeat there. In establishing many of these *wilayat*, the group focused on countries with long-standing insurgencies where it could either coopt well-established terrorist groups or draw dissidents away from those groups to form its new cadre. The new phase, however, is likely to also see IS activity cropping up or expanding through smaller groups in countries where both local and international security forces are less present and effective.

While developments in the DRC and Bangladesh are seemingly insignificant in comparison to the attacks in Sri Lanka, the timing and similarities between them demonstrate the group’s shifting strategy to bolster activities in areas outside its traditional sphere and areas it has not been active recently. In the DRC, its claim suggests it has aligned with factions of the Allied Democratic Forces, a decades-old rebel group that has drawn little Western attention and that operates in an area that would be permissive to the growth of a local IS branch, providing material resources, recruits, and safe havens. In Bangladesh, its claim signals its resilience and pres-

ence despite a harsh government crackdown on militant groups since 2016. Although the culprits were likely members of a local militant group, such as the Neo-JMB, it is a reminder of its influence and its potential for facilitating further attacks. It is also in line with the implicit goal of expanding in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, it proved it could inspire, advise, train, and organize a little-known jihadist group with no significant operational credentials to facilitate one of the most complex and deadly terrorist attacks since 9/11.

Moving forward, IS is likely to use its core commanders and external operations wing to empower little known groups that largely operate under the radar to conduct spectacular, unexpected attacks on soft targets. The locations the group will focus on with this strategy are likely to be those in which there is not a large enough pool of recruits or are too geographically isolated to elevate them to the status of their own *wilayat* under a more unified command. This strategy would allow IS to avoid the scrutiny that comes with formally announcing its presence or accepting pledges of allegiance, instead operating underground and facilitating attacks conducted by smaller local groups. Spectacular and seemingly spontaneous attacks such as the one in Sri Lanka typically lead to an immediate tightening of security and a convergence of both local and international intelligence efforts, which is not conducive to the growth of a new IS group, particularly in comparison to the countries where IS has established a formal *wilayat*. Using this strategy, IS can preserve its core, expand its influence to orchestrate attacks, and cut bait rather than expending the effort and resources to foster a full-fledged *wilayat*. Meanwhile, the group will continue to detach itself from its former base in Syria while promoting and expanding its more developed *wilayat* in Africa and Afghanistan, all of which are environments more conducive to expansion and locations where large-scale attacks do not grab the same attention as places not beset by violence and longstanding insurgencies.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor

SOMALIA: DESPITE INTERNAL STRUGGLES, AL-SHABAAB REMAINS POTENT

Brian M. Perkins

Al-Shabaab is facing a tumultuous time within its ranks but the group's activities over the past month demonstrate that, even when fractured, it remains a potent force in Somalia and Kenya. Over the past several months al-Shabaab has experienced a series of deaths and defections among its leadership. Most notably, al-Shabaab's director of operations in Kenya, Ahmad Imam Ali, was killed during a March 22 airstrike in Middle Juba's Bu'aale town ([Daily Nation](#), April 8; see [MLM](#), May 1). Meanwhile, the group has seen a number of defections to the Kenyan and Somali governments as well as to the local branch of Islamic State (IS). The fierce rivalry with IS has been building over the past year, and al-Shabaab leaders have grown increasingly paranoid about IS defectors and spies within its ranks and has subsequently executed a notable number of its fighters as well as civilians operating near its bases.

The United States has also ramped up its efforts to combat al-Shabaab over the past year, with the number of airstrikes escalating significantly. U.S. President Donald Trump also signed an executive order on April 10 extending the national emergency regarding Somalia for another year to allow a small group of U.S. Special Operations forces to continue training an elite unit of the Somali National Army ([WhiteHouse.gov](#), April 10).

Despite the internal divisions and jockeying to replace lost leaders, al-Shabaab has still managed to conduct dozens of noteworthy attacks across Somalia and Kenya over the past month and was also reportedly plotting an attack in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa ([New Business Ethiopia](#), April 14). The group has conducted two separate attacks on Ugandan forces in Lower Shabelle—the first on April 27 in Amareeso and the second on April 29 in Barawe. On April 28, the group claimed responsibility for a bombing that targeted a Kenyan military convoy in the Daba Siti area of Mandera, its first claimed operation in Kenya in two months ([Mareeg](#), April 28). Additionally, al-Shabaab is reportedly responsible for kidnapping two Cuban doctors and killing their police escort in Mandera County on April 12 ([The Star](#), April 13).

Al-Shabaab is facing increased pressure from local and international forces, competition from IS, and increased factionalization, but the breadth of its operations over the past several months indicate that it remains highly capable of conducting attacks on soft and hard targets within and outside of Somalia. It is unclear if and when the leadership struggles and fracturing ranks will start to weigh on the group, but for now, it appears that it is still capable of operating, even if it is doing so through rival factions that are no longer as closely coordinated. The internal struggles the group is facing, however, do provide an opening that local and international forces should seek to further exploit by encouraging further defections and isolating its leaders.

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Down But Not Out: al-Qaeda and the Algerian Protest Movement

Ben Abboudi

When President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term as president sparked large-scale countrywide demonstrations, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) saw an opportunity to exploit the sudden political instability ([Le Point](#), February 25). The group expressed its support for the demonstrations in a statement by Abu Ubaydah Yusuf al-Anabi, a leading AQIM figure, labeled "[Algeria and the Exit From the Dark Tunnel](#)" on March 9 ([Jihadology](#), March 10).

He said that the "decisive uprising has pleased (us)" and criticized the country's socio-economic conditions while calling for the implementation of strict Sharia (Islamic law). This was followed by another show of support by al-Anabi on April 4 on Telegram following Bouteflika's resignation. An analysis of closed source intelligence indicates that on April 12, al-Qaeda's central media group al-Sahab released a statement offering support for the ongoing "struggle" of protesters in the Middle East, with specific references made to Algeria ([Jihadology](#), April 19).

AQIM's attempt to manipulate the movement was a failure. Algerian military forces have significantly degraded the group's capabilities over recent years. The country was subject to a vicious civil war between 1991 and 2002 that was triggered by the election of an Islamist party. The military rejected these results and forced parliament to dissolve, sparking a prolonged period of brutal violence. A multitude of Algerian Islamists who sought to topple the government in the civil war eventually pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda. They formally joined the group in 2007 before changing its name to AQIM.

However, a spate of large-scale bombings, as well as a large-scale assault on the In Amenas gas facility, triggered a brutal military crackdown. This included targeting the group's leadership, such as Abu Rouaha al-Qasantini, one of the group's key propagandists ([Middle East Eye](#), February 1, 2018). Concerted military opera-

tions have, to date, significantly depleted the group's operational capabilities.

AQIM's Algeria Defeat

The group is largely confined to mountainous areas in the northeast, in regions bordering Tunisia, and to limited cells operating in the country's far south. It has limited access to the manpower and resources utilized by Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), which comprises large amounts of former AQIM members. JNIM has sowed insecurity by carrying out acts of violence against local communities and United Nations peacekeeping forces ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), February 10). Despite being significantly weakened in Algeria, the country is still an attractive target for AQIM; it is the largest country in Africa and is the group's birthplace.

Algeria's stability and high-profile gas industry also make it an attractive prospect, as a successful attack would have a higher profile than attacks in countries such as Chad, Mali, or Niger. AQIM was not able to carry out a single suicide bombing against an urban center in 2018; the first year without a suicide bombing in over 20 years ([Middle East Monitor](#), January 11). This has largely been due to a significant bolstering of Algeria's counterterrorism capabilities, aided by advanced technology funded by European and American partners who have a vested interest in ensuring Algerian stability. This is to avoid further refugee influxes into southern Europe and to ensure Algeria's LNG industry remains unaffected.

In addition to high tech night-vision capabilities and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), the Algerian army has a plethora of advanced Russian arms and now has at least one U.S.-manufactured AN/TPS-78 long-range air surveillance radar in its arsenal, which can detect different targets in challenging environmental conditions ([Defence Blog](#), February 6; see [EDM](#), September 5, 2018). The country's borders have been largely secured; the attack against the In Amenas Tigantourine gas facility in eastern Algeria in 2013 served as a wakeup call that militants were crossing borders with relative freedom.

Conclusion

Commonalities exist between Algeria and other regional countries. Islamist militants capitalized on a power vacuum in Libya and now carry out attacks against hard infrastructure on a monthly basis. Islamist groups in Egypt

gained greater operational freedom when the country was engulfed in political crises from 2011-2013. Even Tunisia, which is the only so-called "Arab Spring" success story, has had to tackle an embedded militant presence in its border areas (see [TM](#), March 1).

The Algerian military will remain powerful in Bouteflika's absence and will not want to cede power to a democratically-elected government. Despite a significant decrease in its capabilities, AQIM is biding its time in the background in anticipation of being able to capitalize on the collapse of political stability. Even though elections are set for July, there is no clear sign that protests will abate or that polls will be free and fair.

Whoever takes control in Algeria will have to deal with a struggling economy, the sustained threat of militancy in Tunisia and Libya's border areas, and an increase in propaganda efforts aimed at disaffected youths. While AQIM has not yet shown the capability to infiltrate this protest movement, the group and their affiliates have shown their ability in the past to capitalize on power vacuums, meaning that the Algeria protest movement is not out of the woods yet.

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Sri Lankan Suicide Bombings: Islamic State's Deadly Input

Sudha Ramachandran

On April 21, multiple suicide attacks on churches and high-end hotels in Sri Lanka killed 253 people, including 40 foreigners, and injured at least 500 others ([Sunday Times](#), April 28). The suicide bombings, which are among the deadliest terrorist attacks in the world since the September 11 attacks in the United States, have drawn attention to the Islamic State (IS) group's links with local radicals in the island.

A day after the attacks, the Sri Lankan government spokesman said that a little-known local Islamist group, the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ), had carried out the suicide bombings. But the NTJ was not acting alone, he said, adding that the government would investigate whether the group had "international support" ([Ceylon Today](#), April 22).

The Easter Sunday suicide bombings were complex and displayed a high-level of co-ordination. They required resources and expertise beyond the capability of the NTJ, an outfit that until recently was known for its inflammatory rhetoric and vandalism of Buddhist statues rather than serial suicide bombings ([New Indian Express](#), April 22). Ongoing investigations indicate that IS supported local Islamist radicals in the attacks. While the NTJ and another little-known Sri Lanka-based Islamist group, Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI) "provided the manpower, the Islamic State's input included ideological inspiration, expertise in bomb-making, and perhaps even resources," a senior Sri Lankan police official told *Terrorism Monitor*. [1]

Islamic State Claims Responsibility

IS claimed responsibility for the attacks two days later. In a statement published by its official news agency, Amaq, it said the attackers are "fighters from the Islamic State" ([Sunday Times](#), April 23). A video was also circulated showing eight people, purportedly the Sri Lankan suicide bombers pledging allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. All but one of the bombers has their face covered. The unmasked individual has been identified as Zahran Hashim, the leader of the NTJ, who carried out the attack on the Shangri-La hotel in Colombo

([The Hindu](#), April 25). IS has since identified three more people who blew themselves up during a police raid a week later in Ampara in eastern Sri Lanka ([Daily Mirror](#), April 28).

Subsequently, IS clarified the motivation behind the serial attacks. In a propaganda video released on August 29, al-Baghdadi can be heard describing the attacks in Sri Lanka as "vengeance" for its fighters, who were killed defending Baghouz in Syria ([Daily Mirror](#), April 30).

Rising Radicalism

The Sri Lankan suicide bombings came just weeks after the fall of Baghouz. Having lost all its territory, IS was perhaps keen to signal that it remains a potent group. Sri Lanka was a suitable target in this regard. Since the end of the civil war in 2009, Colombo had lowered its guard against terrorist attacks. Further, many Westerners come to the island as tourists, and Sri Lanka has a sizeable Christian population. These factors provided the bombers with soft targets. Importantly, Islamic radicalism was growing in the island, providing IS with foot-soldiers to carry out the attacks.

As in other parts of the world, Muslims in Sri Lanka have been caught in the vortex of radicalism. Wahhabism, a conservative strain of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia and traditionally alien to South Asian Muslims, has been making inroads into the Sri Lankan Muslim community in recent decades ([Himal Southasian](#), April 26). The Saudis have provided scores of Sri Lankan Muslims with scholarships to study in Saudi universities. These students returned home to preach Wahhabi-Salafist teachings, enabling it to take root in the island ([Colombo Telegraph](#), March 27, 2013).

Post-9/11, radical Sri Lankan Muslims became more assertive and more willing to use violence. However, their targets were not the island's Buddhists, Hindus, or Christians, but Sufis and moderates within the Muslim community ([Himal Southasian](#), April 26). The homes and shrines of Sufis were attacked and Muslims engaging in "un-Islamic activity" such as gambling or drinking threatened ([Colombo Telegraph](#), March 27, 2013). It was from this pool of radicals that Hashim and several others, who were drawn towards jihadist ideology, emerged. [2] Hashim is reported to have spent "substantial" time in south India. Among his Facebook followers were IS sympathizers who were planning to as-

sassinate political and religious leaders in India ([The Hindu](#), April 26).

Inroads

Radical Muslims from Sri Lanka were not drawn to al-Qaeda. Indeed, according to Ajai Sahni, Executive Director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Conflict Management, “there is no confirmed report of any Sri Lankan joining the al-Qaeda.” “The al-Qaeda failed to make inroads in South Asian countries (except for Pakistan and Afghanistan,” he said, and “Sri Lanka was no exception.” [3]

However, IS was able to draw South Asians into its fold. A section of Sri Lankan Muslim youth was inspired by its ideology and achievements. Domestic developments in the island could have pushed Sri Lankan Muslim radicals to jihadism in recent years. Since 2011, Muslims have been attacked violently by Sinhalese-Buddhist extremists. While this violence may not have prompted the recent suicide bombings—if it had been the underlying trigger the bombers would have targeted Buddhist shrines, not churches—it could be a factor in Sri Lankan Muslims being more receptive to IS since 2014 than al-Qaeda in the previous decade. Indeed, the NTJ emerged in 2014, the same year that IS gained global prominence.

Joining the Jihad

Social media appears to have played a major role in Sri Lankan Muslims being drawn to volunteer as fighters. A Facebook group “Seylan Muslims in Shaam” (Sri Lankan Muslims in the Levant) urged Sri Lankans to join the jihad. In 2014, when al-Baghdadi called on Muslims to immigrate to the “caliphate,” several Sri Lankans heeded his call. Among them was Mohamed Muhsin Sharfaz Nilam (a.k.a. Abu Shurayh al-Silani), who left the island in January 2015, along with his family of six children, his pregnant wife, and parents, to join the fighting in Syria. His “martyrdom” in a U.S.-led coalition airstrike in Raqqa in July that year was announced by another Sri Lankan jihadist and subsequently by *Dabiq*, IS’ online magazine ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 2, 2015).

In 2016, Sri Lanka’s Defense Secretary Karunasena Hettiarachchi said that 36 Muslims had gone to Syria to join the Islamic State ([Daily News](#), January 5, 2016). They came from four families that are well-connected and re-

spected, Sri Lanka’s Minister of Justice, Wijeyadasa Rajapakshe, told parliament ([Colombo Telegraph](#), November 19, 2016). Several scores more joined them thereafter. While many may have died in the fighting there, others would have returned to the island when IS started losing territory. They would have “inspired, indoctrinated and trained others to become jihadists”. [4] Investigations into the recent suicide bombings have determined that two of the suspects “are Islamic State returnees from Syria and Iraq.” While “their exact role in planning and executing the suicide bombings remains unclear, Sri Lankan intelligence has established that the two men were Islamic State-trained.” [5]

The intelligence wings of the Sri Lankan security forces have also found that Nizam, the first leader of JMI and a barrister in England, went to Syria in 2012 and was trained by IS. He subsequently returned home to Sri Lanka and took around 45 people to Syria for training. After training in Syria, these men “are believed to have returned to the island.” JMI is “now reported to have 139 members” who “have been trained in making bombs. “Six of the suicide bombers” who carried out the recent attacks “were members of this organization.” [6]

Conclusion

The Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka were possible because IS collaborated with local Islamic radicals of the NTJ and JMI. The latter two were able to transform themselves from rhetoric-spewing groups engaging in vandalism to deadly suicide bombers thanks to the expertise, resources and training provided by IS. While it was IS that enabled local Sri Lankan radicals to make the deadly transition, the process of transmission has not been a one-way street. As the example of Hashim shows, his incendiary rhetoric and other expertise could have inspired IS supporters in India and elsewhere.

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Notes

[1] Author’s interview with a senior Colombo-based Sri Lankan police official, April 28.

Governor of Socotra Vows to Confront UAE Allies

Rafid Jaboori

In April, the governor of the Yemeni governorate of Socotra, Ramzi Mahroos, announced his vehement rejection to the formation of any militias in Socotra. He vowed to work against any such move, stating that it would create divisions and more conflict between Yemenis. Despite official denial, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is a member of the Saudi-led coalition, supports the formation of local militias in Socotra. Local militias were formed in other southern Yemeni governorates by UAE-backed South Yemeni secessionists, which have gained more power during the war ([al-Mahrah Post](#), April 29).

The UAE has also backed the most organized secessionist political group, the Southern Transitional Council (STC). [1] Although Socotra has not witnessed fighting during the Yemen war, it has been at the center of a different power struggle. Governor Mahroos's announcement indicates the most recent public clash between Yemeni officials and the UAE and its Yemeni allies over Socotra.

Yemeni President Abed Rabu Mansour Hadi invited the coalition to help his government resist and push back against the Houthi rebels in 2015. However, many in the Yemeni government and public were antagonized by UAE policies that aimed to dominate South Yemen in particular. In May 2017, President Hadi even stated that the UAE was acting like an occupying power in Yemen ([al-Mashhad](#), May 3, 2017).

Yemenis frequently raise concerns that the UAE wants to dominate shipping routes by controlling Aden and the Bab al-Mandab strait. In 2012, Yemen canceled a deal for the UAE-based port operator DP World to run Aden's port. [2] Corruption was given as a reason, but many in Yemen believe that the UAE wished to undermine Aden in order to prevent the city from emerging as a competitor to Dubai ([al-Jazeera](#), August 8, 2012).

With the development of the Yemen war and the UAE's strong ties with southern secessionists, the city and port of Aden have come under the *de facto* control of the UAE. Controlling Socotra, which is an archipelago of

[2] Ibid.

[3] Author's Interview with Ajai Sahni, counterterrorism expert and executive director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Conflict Management (April 29).

[4] Author's interview with a senior Colombo-based Sri Lankan police official, April 28.

[5] Author's Interview with Ajai Sahni, counterterrorism expert and executive director of the New Delhi-based Institute for Conflict Management (April 29).

[6] Ibid.

four islands located 240 miles from the southern Yemen coastline and 150 miles off Somalia and the Horn of Africa, would provide further maritime superiority to the UAE. [3]

The main flashpoint in the course of the Yemeni-UAE struggle in Socotra took place in April 2018. During a visit by then Yemeni Prime Minister Ahmed Obeid Bin Daghar, dozens of UAE troops landed in the local airport in Socotra's capital Hadibo and the main port. Bin Daghar condemned the move and called for public opposition, which resulted in rallies that stressed that Socotra was part of Yemen in the face of perceived UAE efforts to annex the archipelago. The Yemeni government took the issue to the UN Security Council. The UAE had to back down and announced that it recognized Yemen's sovereignty in Socotra. Saudi troops were brought in through an ambiguous settlement that saw the end of the UAE's deployment ([Masrawy](#), May 14, 2018).

UAE troops are still in Socotra, but they are operating less visibly under the coalition umbrella. Khalfan al-Mazroe, the UAE representative in Socotra, is believed to have control of the airport, the main port and many other positions in Socotra.

President Hadi is walking a fine line in his relations with the UAE. Hadi has had rocky relationships with previous governors of Socotra, who were willing to partner with the UAE. In June 2017, he expelled the governor of Socotra, along with two other governors in the mainland, in a move that aimed to curtail Emirati influence on local leaders in South Yemen ([Makkah Newspaper](#), June 29, 2017).

While his strategy in Aden and Hadramawt largely failed—as the people he fired were instead further empowered and became more aligned to the UAE—he appears to be in a better position in Socotra with Governor Mahroos on his side. Unlike many parts of South Yemen, where secessionist groups are in control and secession flags are more apparent than the Yemeni flag, in Socotra Hadi seems to be consolidating his position as a unifying national symbol ([Makkah Newspaper](#), May 7, 2018).

Governor Mahroos's recent statement against UAE-backed groups was not the first time he dealt with the issue. Last year he took a series of actions to abort a UAE-supported coup attempt ([al-Sharq](#), August 19,

2018). However, there were expectations that relations would improve when he made a two-week visit to the UAE but that seems to have faded away.

The controversy about the UAE's goals in Socotra was renewed earlier this year. A video of the prominent Emirati historian Hamad al-Matrooshi promising Socotrans would be granted Emirati citizenship for their historical ties with the UAE, went viral. Families of the leaders of the UAE-backed Yemeni groups live in the UAE away from the hard life in Yemen. Buying the loyalty of the whole local population of Socotra will be a difficult and largely unrealistic way of annexing Socotra.

The UAE's policy to exert ultimate influence on Socotra is not only facing difficulties from Governor Mahroos. The UAE has also failed to win over key tribal leaders like Sheikh Abdullah Bin Afrar, whose family ruled the Sultanate of al-Mahra and Socotra for hundreds of years before the formation of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). He has been increasingly vocal in his opposition to the UAE's policy in Socotra ([al-Mahrah Post](#), March 24). Bin Afrar and his family are no longer the rulers of Socotra, but his influence over the population is still significant, especially when it comes to deciding the fundamental question of remaining a part of Yemen or seceding from it.

Conclusion

Socotra is far from the heart of the Yemeni conflict, but a distinct power struggle has taken shape there. The Yemeni nationalist sentiment has been on the rise on the island in the face of the UAE's moves. However, if the situation in Yemen keeps deteriorating and the county disintegrates further, some Socotrans might eventually prefer to join the UAE. That scenario has the potential of starting a new chapter in the Yemen war—this time between nationalists and pro-UAE groups, while causing more regional disputes over the UAE's expansion.

The power struggle continues in Socotra with the possibility of escalation. The UAE seems to have abandoned the direct military deployment approach in favor of forming allied local militias. In other parts of South Yemen, similar militias eventually prevailed and became dominant. Governor Mahroos is defending his own position, and his allegiance to President Hadi seems unequivocal now despite previous rumors he called for joining the UAE.

The UAE will continue to work towards empowering its allies on the island. Socotra, and al-Mahra, represent a challenge to the South Yemeni secessionist movement. Large sections of the populations in both governorates do not support the secessionist movements for economic and historical reasons. The formation of militias by the secessionists could bring about the possibility of internal conflict. On the regional level, other parties will likely be interested in exploiting the possible chaos. Not long ago, Somali pirates used Socotra as a station to get fuel and food. If a separate chapter of civil war broke out between pro- and anti-UAE groups, the Yemeni conflict would grow even more complicated, and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels would most likely benefit. Meanwhile, militant groups that operate nearby, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Shabaab, might also develop interests in Socotra's strategic position and potential.

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Notes

[1] Socotra was part of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) between its inception as a state in 1967 and the unification of South and North Yemen in 1990

[2] The deal was signed by the government of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh who was deposed after the 2011 mass uprising.

[3] A main factor behind the UAE's support for the STC and the secessionists in South Yemen is the grand strategy in the Middle East which prioritize confronting the Muslim Brotherhood branches. In Yemen the UAE has been skeptical about the power and influence that the Muslim Brotherhood and their political arm, al-Islah Party, enjoy within president Hadi's government and military. That was one of the bases that led to the UAE support for the southern secessionists as a power to confront the Muslim Brotherhood.