

## Chapter 4

### The Frontier as a Measure of Modern State Power

Ārdak... ‘ardak (Your Land is Your Honour—Local Ṣa‘dah Proverb)

The transformation of the Ottoman and British Empires over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was indelibly linked to the subtle, daily exchanges between subject and state. Similar dynamics impacted the means by which post-imperial states in Arabia asserted sovereignty over territory. The cumulative result of these daily interactions was the emergence of a complicated range of economic and political opportunities for many non-state actors. In response to people taking advantage of these opportunities, state administrations have been constantly forced to modify policies in the hope of establishing political and economic order in an otherwise contentious, often unstable environment. In this chapter I expand on this observation by focusing on the cumulative effect of newly introduced practices that attempted to realize territorial redefinition of the northern regions of Ottoman Yemen, the territories that became the frontier separating North/South Yemen and finally the modern boundary between Saudi Arabia and unified Yemen in the ‘Asīr.

In exploring how the state defined authority by way of its borders, both those *separating* “different” people (nations, ethnicities or faiths) and *confining* them for the purpose of outlining administrative jurisdiction (Smith and Katz 1993: 68-73), we gain a new understanding of the scope of transformation in the history of different regimes governing parts of Yemen. This is especially true after the military defeat of Ottoman forces in its war with Tsarist Russia in 1877

and early 1878, a defeat that led to a dramatic redrawing of the empire's borders (Blumi 2003). The subsequent efforts by outside powers to regulate the redistribution of Ottoman territories in the Balkans, Arabia and Eastern Anatolia using completely alien concepts of territoriality required first that the state distinguish its subjects by their presumed ethno-religious affiliations and then define a new set of socio-economic possibilities for these aggregated inhabitants. The concern here will be the policy adjustments adopted to address the dwindling capacity of empires to maintain their territorial integrity while also asserting a particular kind of regime on an increasingly resistant local population. Exploring how subsequent "reforms" ultimately impacted those living in the affected regions opens up another way of understanding the effects of empire on Yemen by expanding the way the Ottoman and British Empires are studied in cartographic as well as in administrative terms.

Violence in the Şa'dah region today has arisen because the relationship between the local and the larger world was abruptly changed in ways that parallel the late Ottoman period. Over the last decade, this once porous zone of commerce has become the centre of Saudi state efforts to change its border management regime. As a result, the Şa'dah region and its inhabitants are threatened with being shut out of a traditional source of revenue and its accompanying political leverage.<sup>1</sup> On the other side of the country, the former border separating North and South Yemen has in itself retained significance in larger Yemeni politics. Among others, since unification the area has been a targeted zone for influence with migrants from the North encouraged to settle the

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<sup>1</sup> This border dispute also led to direct clashes between Yemeni forces and the Saudi state is a crucial issue. Sadly little research has actually connected local politics in places like Şa'dah with this on-going dispute that has shaped much of the 1990s in southern Arabia (Schofield 1997).

South with the subsequent change in land ownership patterns playing out in complex ways. Comparing and contrasting these two experiential zones with more or less their historical analogues in the pre-World War I period should serve as a platform to explore more closely the extent to which the modern Yemeni state is shaping lives towards conflict. As in other chapters, to make these cases stand out, the pre-World War I period serves to provide a constructive perspective by briefly explaining how the border as a diplomatic issue emerged in the late Ottoman era and how it directly affected the lives of those living throughout contested areas of Yemen.

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The history of the modern Middle East is marked by the way territorial space was both occupied and produced (or reproduced) by states that succeeded the Ottoman Empire (Altuğ and White 2009). Some scholars exploring the phenomenon more generally have persuasively argued that the creation of these modern states can be linked to a “process” in which institutions and actors “normalize and naturalize” a spatial order that was contingent to unrelated “historical forces.” According to Corrigan and Sayer, for instance, the transformation of the modern state from a possibility to a fact begins when maps that *name* this “reality” *define* it as well (Corrigan and Sayer 1991: 141-2).

Such an understanding of the modern world proves helpful in appreciating the impact of the new set of cartographic realities produced after the Russo-Ottoman war of 1877-1878 and then the Berlin Congress of 1884-1885 for the delimitation of “spheres of influence” in Africa. In many

ways, the “reality” of the this process and the transformation of much of the non-European world into distinct possessions, colonies and then nation-states first manifested itself (but not realized) in the form of maps written on flimsy paper by European bureaucrats. As is clear with the case of Yemen, it was only later (if ever) that the new order of ethno-national states was “really” implemented on the ground (Wedeen 2008: 22-38). More than simply being part of an international effort to resolve the question of the Ottoman Empire, however, the mobilization of what some believed were spatial metaphors to redefine who lived where introduced a larger concern with “space” that is actively discussed in critical theory today.<sup>2</sup>

As suggested in the literature, the actual signing of formal treaties, creating independent spaces that distinguish one territory from another should not coax us to thinking of the process as being transparent and ideologically neutral (Smith and Katz 1993; Tumbell 1993: 32-45). Similarly, the “space” of various Yemen polities—the Imamate, “tribal lands,” sovereign post-imperial states and indeed the truncated Ottoman Empire—are not detached from meaning and experience. This is especially clear with the case of the Ṣa‘dah and Ḥujarīyyah regions which became epicentres of social and political contestation in the period prior to World War I and then again in the twenty-first century. Markings on a map outlining governed spaces high in the mountainous regions of these two provinces inaugurated a new set of political opportunities for its inhabitants. Although these places and peoples were treated as if they had histories separate from the process

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<sup>2</sup> Much of the work of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault uses spatial metaphors that tend to assert a functional banality to the places and peoples encapsulated by the map. This leaves out the possibility for challenges and modifications of these peoples and places. See for instance Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar (1971) and Michel Foucault (1980: 70-2).

that delineated a “frontier” through their homeland, in a paradoxical way the act of drawing the frontier through these regions actually gave locals a central role in the very process of delineation and the direction modern states would move.

In other words, cartographic space does not simply “display” itself in the form of a dot or line on a map. It has to be enacted and realized on the ground, sometimes by people tragically transformed by them. Henri Lefebvre noted that in “space...there is a productive process,” which suggests “history” and power is applied (Lefebvre 1991: 46). But it is not always the victorious that impose a reading of their power in the form of a map. As much as states that sign treaties, be it the Ṭāʾif agreement of 1934 that secured Saudi claims over much of the ‘Asīr or the British/Ottoman treaties over the valuable Ḥujarīyyah area that straddled the future borders between North and South, men sanctioned by diplomatic protocol may make the lines on the map a fact but such acts certainly did not erase what was “missing” from them.

As discussed at length later in this chapter, the story behind the 1934/2000 frontiers dividing the ‘Asīr into Mutawakkilī and Saudi spheres of influence reveals how key aspects of the modern world order were not enforceable under certain circumstances. In the end, the logic of power in its modern application failed to address the concerns of the inhabitants of affected regions, resulting in transforming an imperial ontological fact—a “frontier” separating “different” peoples, nations and states—into a precarious object of negotiation that made agents of change out of subjects previously ignored.

Recognizing this offers us intriguing and potentially complex angles to interpret the changes taking place in Yemen over the last century. Firstly, the range of opportunities to confront the process of “modernization” becomes vast the moment the limitations of the enforceability of, for instance, realized “facts” on maps, becomes clear. The question, therefore, immediately becomes one of feasibility for states. As the cases in Yemen’s Northern and Southern extremities prove, the state, be it Ottoman, Saudi or British, only had limited means of enforcing new forms of social, economic and political order created as a response to the imposition of a frontier. The constant reminder of this in Ṣa‘dah today has clearly transformed the attitudes of Ṣāliḥ’s inner circle as well as in Riyāḍ and Washington DC. In response, the claimants to state power have adopted new kinds of administrative practices that are designed to correct obvious shortcomings to earlier policies; but as is clear in the Ḥūthī/Ṣa‘dah case, these measures may actually be instigating new forms of local agency that will be impossible to suppress by coercion.

The foundations of what is actually taking place today can be traced back to a period of transition during which the Ḥujarīyyah region became a frontier for the first time. As is known, between 1914 and 1990 southwest Arabia was divided in two by a border, the first 138 miles of which were drawn by the Ottoman and British Empires in negotiations that lasted from 1902 to 1914.<sup>3</sup> What are largely forgotten, however, are the dynamics surrounding the actual erection of

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<sup>3</sup> For a copy of the final meetings which sealed the actual delimitation of the border that would eventually be codified by a treaty signed between the two states in March 1914, see PRO, FO, 371/1805, “Minutes of meeting at Shaykh Said signed by Colonel Mustafā (Ottoman Commissioner) and G.H. Fitzmaurice (British Commissioner)”, dated 20 April 1920 and for a copy of the signed convention, see PRO, FO, 372/573, “Signing of the Convention between the

this frontier in the first place. Moreover, the subsequent impact this new policy of dividing the Aden highlands (Ḥujarīyyah) had on the region's inhabitants speaks directly to a larger point made here: monitoring how local contingencies are far more important to an analysis of events in contemporary Yemen than applying a layer of sociological clichés. Below, I lay out this complicated dynamic surrounding the creation of borders in order to offer a new set of tools to study the current crisis in the South and Ṣa‘dah to the North.

In the post-imperial era, such tensions emerged with the creation of the Saudi state (and formal expansion into the ‘Asīr in 1930). With the shifting enforcement of its boundaries over the years, new kinds of political and economic opportunities and challenges also emerged. One source of tension in recent years is the fact that Saudi Arabia initiated a new policy of enforcing state sovereignty along its shared borders with Yemen that directly regulated, in hitherto unknown ways, who could cross the unmarked territorial boundaries. As a result, peoples living in these areas faced new threats as the Ṣāliḥ regime, the globalisation of the “war on terror” and a more aggressive Saudi state instigated an economic transformation that directly impacted how communities in and around Ṣa‘dah engaged in daily commerce and social exchange. Their subsequent revolt, in part, originates from the consequences of these socio-economic changes.

The reasons why the resulting violence persists cannot, as highlighted earlier in respect to the Idrīsī story, rest solely on doctrinal differences. The so-called Shī‘ī opposition today, much as with the Idrīsī coalitions of the turn-of-the-century, constitutes a diverse set of interests in a

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United Kingdom and Ottoman Government relative to Aden boundary”, dated 4 and 9 March 1914.

region long known for its economic and political autonomy from the rest of the country.

Similarly, what happened in the South after unification in 1990—which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter—is not new to Yemen. To fully appreciate this, however, it is necessary to further theorize the border experience in the context of the Ottoman Empire.

### **Object of State becomes Subject in History**

The Berlin Congress of 1878 may be characterized as the Great Powers' attempt to impose a particular reading of space in the Ottoman Empire. This reading would thus establish an order to the larger world predicated on some basic guiding principles. Unexpectedly, the people living in these spaces, by resisting the attempt to implement and enforce this reading of the world, actually influenced the subsequent performance of empire in Yemen (Blumi 2003). The areas in which they lived in a matter of months became “known” as contested areas that needed to be renegotiated between agents of empire and its inhabitants. This assured a place in history for those living in these regions; the incredulous authorities managing imperial affairs were compelled to write about them as they resisted what has long been assumed a quintessentially modern exercise of state power.

Such exchanges between locals and modern empires force us to think of the relationship actual people have with the territories under negotiation between states. Modern politics and diplomacy, in other words, is much more a product of interactions between diverse groups of stakeholders than abstract theories would have us believe. This ultimately helps us resurrect Said's important assertion that some people do make their own history by way of their

understanding of geography.<sup>4</sup> The dots with names on maps suddenly become “places” that have meaning to people who live there and thus have been ascribed value.<sup>5</sup> Where one could differ from Said is the focus of who part-takes in the process; it is as much the marginal Yemeni peasant, shepherd or merchant as the European imperial agent who draws the lines of state, community and history.

The relevance of this intervention for our study of contemporary Yemen is made clear by realizing the dynamics of Great Power politics in the decades leading up to World War I were largely shaped by events on the ground, not in the smoke-filled halls of imperial capitals. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, for instance, the entire redrawing of European and Middle Eastern maps was as much a reflection on events in the territories under question as in Berlin, St. Petersburg or Istanbul. For example, in order to politically assure that the “sick man of Europe” survived Russia’s efforts to tear it apart after the 1877-1878 war, new mechanisms were introduced by Istanbul to streamline the political and administrative operation of the Ottoman state. The tools mobilized by the state were supposed to establish a cartographic order to its territories demanded by the Berlin Treaty of 1878. The most striking manifestation of this was the attempt to establish a stable method of naming land within the confines of an ethno-national

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<sup>4</sup> Said was correct to locate the use of geography in colonial thought and practice. It was a particular method of analysis that orientated the world in geographic form, collapsing much of the world into a single analytical unit with a specific essence that helped construct, in turn, the identity of the “West” (Said 1978: 49-71).

<sup>5</sup> For more discussion on this reading of place in respect to the space delineated by maps, see Tuan (1977: 31-129); and Gregory (1994: 23-41).

state. In order to effectively accomplish this, certain bureaucratic routines—surveying, place-naming and mapmaking—were adopted and normalized.

Although there was a long history of such activities in the Ottoman Empire, a new set of operational demands caused by military defeat transformed the way the state monitored and conceived its territories. Texts in the form of maps, titles, deeds and geographic descriptions found in the Ottoman archives reveal a process in which bureaucrats and speculators strove to produce new conceptual spaces in order to grasp an objective reality that carried analytical, ideological or monetary value. Basically, the Berlin Congress of 1878 established the importance of cartographic order in maintaining a global system dependant on a state system centred in Europe. In time, Ottoman modifications of how it conceived the state in maps, thereby marking state frontiers with named “spaces” like the provinces of Yemen, ‘Asīr or Ḥijāz, created a sense of stability essential for the performance of government. The process of realizing this stability, however, quickly produced material facts of its own that ultimately contradicted that sense of order.

The 1872-1918 period in Arabia is especially important because it marks a conjuncture of disciplinary and operational developments that attributed new significance to territorial and cultural borders by way of defining people in certain ways (Abercrombie 1991: 95-7). Among other things, boundaries began to serve as tools for states to make sovereign claims over geographical, historical and more importantly, sociological spaces defined by ethnicity and faith. What made this change possible were in part the growing capacities of the state to assume and then project power in all aspects of its relationship with subject populations (Pyenson 1993;

Vincent 1990: 13-23). As a consequence, the redefinition of communal identities became a product of central administrative policy, resulting in an exchange of at times conflicting readings of the world and local reality. Importantly, these contradictory interpretations of the “frontiers” (both territorial and cultural) calibrated by the imperial state created over time a context for exchange that did not fully confine itself to parameters set by the state. Indeed, the “subaltern” natives who were frequently targeted by these measures reacted in ways that persistently confounded the principal assumptions of power embedded in the shift towards defining the world within neatly confined territorial and ethnographic (“tribal”) boundaries.

Tragically, the exchanges between subjects and the state over where local readings of territory and space end and the state’s begins evolved into governmental policies (and their organized local reactions) that sought to correct the “inconsistencies and anomalies” within newly conceived borders. In other words, both the state and its subjects, many who violently resisted the changes to their lives caused by new cartographic realities, adopted similar methods of redefining their respective communities. As a result, imperial rivalries along the frontiers translated into the systemic use of modern technology (guns, maps, bureaucracies) to realize self-fulfilling prophecies of “recaptured” ethnic heartlands, while locals adopted what I call strategic identities that required the use of violence in order to protect new interpersonal boundaries (Blumi 2005: 138-82). This process irreparably transformed the region’s heterogeneous past (it was legally no longer possible to claim multiple ethnic identities) and quickly pitted state allies against resistant “rebels.” One of the consequences was ethnic cleansing, which became an administrative tool that ultimately created the modern world’s image of itself and its heritage.

As discussed throughout, from the very outset indigenous politics played a central role in shaping imperial interests in South Arabia. In the highland regions of Yemen, economic partnerships with foreign, especially British and Egyptian, merchants reinforced Yemen's connection to the global economy in the nineteenth century. Coffee, honey and the indigenous mild stimulant, *qāt*, harvested exclusively in the mountains, became important commodities in the early nineteenth century regional economy. For some, like the numerous communities in 'Abdalī located outside the southern port of Aden, such partnerships helped them to establish as local dynasties that evolved into pseudo-states by the late nineteenth century. In this respect, most of the region had enough manpower and influence to maintain their political and economic autonomy, which is the key to understanding its relations with outside powers in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

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Since the East India Company (EIC) secured the port of Aden by way of a commercial treaty with locals in 1839, the 'Abdalī region by default became the centre of British commercial and administrative expansion into southern Arabia (Gavin 1975: 1-38). The British main strategic and commercial concern was assuring the port remained supplied with food and water and that it remained secure from external attack (Kour 1981). As a partner in this growing commercial enterprise that saw a growing importation of South Asian labourers to handle the increasing amount of ships arriving in port, the cluster of communities in the 'Abdalī region were expected to maintain the supplies of potable water and protect the supply caravans coming from the highlands in exchange for the periodically renegotiated stipends they received from the

Government of India which administered Aden from Bombay. This kind of partnership with locals in Aden's hinterland influenced local politics and shaped in particular the political fortunes of the extended 'Abdalī family's for more than a century.<sup>6</sup>

Aden's administration negotiated its first political treaty with various representatives of the 'Abdalī in the 1840s. As a result, authorities in Bombay who oversaw the Aden operations had assumed that their commercial connections in the highlands were assured and that they would retain some influence over the region's commercial activity by way of the treaty signed with an ascendant local intermediary the British would designate as the 'Abdalī "sulṭān." As already suggested, the situation changed with the arrival of the Ottomans in the 1860s—followed by France and Italy—who intensified the competition for influence in Yemen soon after. The consequence of this infusion of multiple interests in Yemen was that the entire Ḥujarīyyah region between the highland city of Ta'izz and Aden became an arena for imperial intrigue. The principals involved included imperial agents and local political entrepreneurs who negotiated with local community leaders the loyalty of large clusters of inhabitants in the region. As in the case of 'Asīr discussed earlier, such opportunities were not lost on locals.

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<sup>6</sup> In time, the Aden administrators developed similar relationships with communities even further in the interior. Clusters of allies the British would call the Faḍlī, 'Amīrī, Yāfī'ī, Ḥawshabī and 'Alawī "tribes" were all to be governed through appointed "sulṭāns" or "amīrs" (acknowledged by the British through formal ceremonies and treaties), that would defer the power to administer much of Yemen to compliant locals (Waterfeld 1968).

For their part, the Ottomans responded to local political opportunism with some positive results. For example, in a short period of time after settling in the highlands in and around Ta‘izz, the Ottoman authorities were able to secure via treaties agricultural lands that promised large increases in tax revenue for the central state coffers.<sup>7</sup> In this context of rationalizing the investment of state-building in potentially hostile territory, Aḥmed Muḥtar Pasha, the commander of the army who conquered the highlands and established the first administration, envisioned Yemen’s eventual full integration into the Ottoman Empire.<sup>8</sup> Within two years, a legal and fiscal bureaucracy was in operation in Ta‘izz, with courts adjudicating Ottoman imperial laws and a regular tax being collected by local allies.<sup>9</sup>

The British response to these changes was confused at best. Officials both in Bombay and in London assumed the diplomatic relations the British Empire solidified with Istanbul since the 1850s meant the Ottomans were not going to interfere in areas clearly under British influence. The problem from the start was such assumed “spheres of influence” were ambiguous at best. Almost immediately after the Ottoman expeditionary forces moved into areas south of Ta‘izz in 1872, shifts in power among communities previously assumed allies of the ‘Abdalī hinted at

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<sup>7</sup> The Ottomans’ principal administrative architect of the 1872-1873 campaign into the Ta‘izz highlands offers important insight into the strategic thinking of his government as they basically stumbled into the role of dominant power in North Yemen. Raşid (1874: 2: 258-259, 351-355).

<sup>8</sup> BBA, Irade-Meclis-i Mahsus 1922, Aḥmed Muḥtar Pasha’s report to the Grand Vizier, dated 10 Kanun-ı sani 1288 [22 January 1873], document 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> On the extent to which courts were in operation by 1875-1876, see BBA, A.MKT.MHM, 486/18, Muşafa ‘Asım Pasha to Grand Vizier, dated 15 Temmuz 1292 [27 July 1876].

future problems. Sensing a potentially dangerous undercurrent of local power shifts, authorities in Aden (and the British media in London) voiced fears of that the newly arrived Ottoman administration to the north of Aden could lead to their eventual political and economic domination of the region, thereby threatening some of the lucrative commercial relations established by British companies.

At the same time, authorities based in Aden were having difficulty with some of their local allies. In respect to the crucial area around Lahj, for example, attempts to shift strategy in dealing with local developments more directly as a response to Ottoman gains resulted in attempts to reduce the influence of their increasingly ineffective ally, the Sulṭān of Lahj (Gavin 1975: 127-9). In a panic, the Sulṭān, Faḍl b. Muḥsin, resisted by cultivating as much as possible local alliances that could be used to help remind the British of his utility to them. At the same time, however, Muḥsin also recognized opportunity with the arrival of the Ottomans. As we can observe on numerous occasions today in respect to local actors seeking external patrons (such as well-endowed religious movements based in Saudi Arabia or the Saudi government itself) to pressure the Ṣāliḥ regime to grant them concessions, Sulṭān, Faḍl b. Muḥsin exploited the growing Ottoman military campaign to his north. By raising the issue of possible Ottoman infiltration, Muḥsin was hoping to convince his British interlocutors that only he could secure their interests.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> PRO, FO, 424/32, Translation of letter from Sulṭān Faḍl of Lahj to Major-General Tremenhere received 17 May 1872, enclosed in Major-General Tremenhere to Gonne at Bombay Castle, file no. 4, dated Aden, 21 May 1872.

As with the events in the Lahj prior to World War I, shifts in local politics could lead to new political orientations that, in the 1990s and 2000s, developed along the lines of fluid regional alliances resulting in the possible geographical reconfiguration of Yemen's political map. The point that is especially crucial to highlight here is that unless we can faithfully study the politics beneath the surface of an often misleading simplistic cronyism, new developments that threaten the establishment in Yemen may materialise when interested parties—both domestic and foreign—least expect them. Such conditions exist today in both Şa‘dah and throughout the southern highlands that make up the former borderland separating North and South Yemen. To emphasize again how important it is to not settle for simply monitoring the leadership currently claiming representative responsibilities in Yemen, we shall continue with the history of the Lahj region and to highlight the role internal rivalries played in forcing two empires to change completely their policies towards Yemen.

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Six months after Sulţān, Faḍl b. Muḥsin communicated to British authorities that there was trouble brewing in his district, Brigadier General Schneider, the new Resident in Aden, expressed his concern that his superiors in Bombay and ultimately London were not appreciating the dangerous turn of events in Yemen. In the course of his highlighting the tactics of the Ottomans, he advised that his superiors adopt a more aggressive approach, if for no other reason

than to demonstrate to local allies that they are in fact serious about maintaining a presence in the region.<sup>11</sup>

The Government of India responded to Aden's complaints by reasserting the notion that the so-called Sulṭān of Laḥj was an independent sovereign whose diplomatic alliance with Britain meant he was immune from any Ottoman pressure.<sup>12</sup> In this context, authorities in Bombay expressed their support for the Schneider plan to send out delegation into the highlands in order to reassure "wavering chiefs" that the British were both firmly behind the Sulṭān of Laḥj and able to commit to long-term formal alliances with individual communities willing to promise their allegiance (Ingrams 1938: 634-9).

This action quickly produced results as authorities in Aden secured nominal alliances with nine separate community leaders.<sup>13</sup> Such measures meant to stem what seemed to be a rapidly

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<sup>11</sup> "I need not scarcely refer...to the feeling with which they [local allies] will regard us, if they are coerced by the Turks against their will, while we, as they would suppose, looked on with indifference or with no power to prevent such a proceeding." PRO, FO, 424/32, Brigadier-General Schneider to Gonne at Bombay Castle, file no. 5, dated Aden, 26 October 1872.

<sup>12</sup> PRO, FO, 424/32, The Governor-General of India in Council to the Duke of Argyll, file no. 30B, dated Fort William, 14 February 1873.

<sup>13</sup> On 10 February 1873, Schneider communicated to the Ottoman authorities in Ta'izz the list of local *shuyūkh* whom Aden considered to be under treaty with the British. The tribes under this "Protectorate"—'Abdalī (Laḥj), Faḍlī, 'Aqrabī, Ḥawshabī, 'Alawī, 'Amirī, Subayhī, Yāfī'ī, 'Awlāqī—were to be treated as formally independent entities that would be firmly under British

deteriorating position in respect to regional politics appeared to successfully stop Ottoman overtures in some areas. ‘Alī b. Manī, the Ḥawshabī leader, however, responded negatively to this kind of pressure from Aden, exerted by way of Sulṭān Faḍl. In time, the persistence of ‘Alī b. Manī’s resistance to British efforts to establish order in southern Yemen proves a crucial reminder that local calculations contributed far more to this process than previously acknowledged by historians.<sup>14</sup>

With al-Manī’s defiance of Aden’s orders, the Ottomans seemed to have driven a wedge into some of the British alliances. Within a short period of time, more locals saw an opportunity in aligning with the Ottomans. Sulṭān Faḍl’s younger brother ‘Abdallāh, for example, accepted Ottoman overtures a year after Schneider’s tour in the highlands supposedly solidified British influence. As a reward, the governor of Ta‘izz promptly offered ‘Abdallāh a position in the Ottoman administration. Soon after, ‘Abdallāh proved himself a valuable local asset as he constantly challenged his brother’s authority and thus undermine the British in and around Laḥj.

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protection. PRO, FO, 424/32, Brigadier-General Schneider to Mr. Gonne in Bombay, file no. 30B enclosed letter 15, dated Aden, 10 February 1873. Interestingly, the formal declaration of the Protectorate did not include territorial boundaries as the geography of the region was more or less unknown. IOR, R/20/E/96, No. 38, Declaration of Protectorate, Government of India (Foreign Department) to Duke of Argyll, dated Fort William, 11 April 1873

<sup>14</sup> PRO, FO, 424/32, Brigadier-General Schneider to Mr. Gonne, file no. 52, enclosed letter 5, dated Aden, 18 May 1873.

In protest, the British once again evoked a principle that had yet been fully established diplomatically; in this case, claiming the Ottomans had no “legal” right to conduct their affairs through the younger brother of the “rightful” sovereign leader of Lahj. If the British, upon formally signing a treaty, recognizes the sovereignty of Sulṭān Faḍl’s, the assumption seemed to be that the Ottomans had to recognize that authority as well. Unfortunately for the British, the Ottomans had become especially adept at recruiting members of many of these highland communities the British hoped to control through their treaty with Sulṭān Faḍl. In fact, the Ottomans reported that their successes in recruiting the supposed subordinates of men like Sulṭān Faḍl largely came as a result of locals soliciting Ottoman support. The fact large numbers of village elders flocked to the Ottomans required of the British (and Sulṭān Faḍl) a new set of measures stem the exodus.<sup>15</sup>

These early Ottoman successes clearly indicate that the British and their allies faced a serious problem with legitimacy. Some bureaucrats in Bombay and a growing cluster of voices within the Aden commercial community began to suggest that more effort was needed to gather better intelligence about the communities in the immediate area. In so doing, it would be possible to thwart Ottoman expansion at British expense. In the end, Aden authorities acknowledged that they needed to be better informed about events in the highlands and perhaps take a more proactive approach (and not rely solely on Sulṭān Faḍl) that included aggressively recruiting

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<sup>15</sup> BBA, HR.SYS, 90/3, correspondence no. 5516/166, Embassy to Sublime Porte, dated London, 13 June 1874.

communities living in areas deemed most threatened by Ottoman overtures.<sup>16</sup> In order to better protect the alliances they expected to make, there are indications that these officials started to advocate demarcating a series of borders in the Red Sea region in order to clearly highlight the Britain's "sphere of influence," a precursor to a diplomatic principle codified several years later in Africa between the European imperial powers.<sup>17</sup>

The case of Yemen therefore provides a perfect example of the inadequacies of both empire and some theoretical paradigms developed to study them. In the end, the surveys and the archives of empire, be they commissioned reports about "Aden's Tribes," Ottoman ethnographic surveys, or the boundaries of the empire speak not of imperial fiat divorced from local conditions but of a scramble to react to actual events taking place on the ground that were largely initiated by local forces.<sup>18</sup> As a result, rather than being subjugated by the "technologies of power" (implying complete subordination), many of the people identified by terms like "tribe" and "sect" in the

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<sup>16</sup> PRO, FO, 424/32, Brigadier-General Schneider to the Duke of Argyll, file no. 42, dated Aden, 27 May 1874.

<sup>17</sup> See PRO, FO, 84/1813, Kaiser Wilhelm to King of Portugal, 19 October 1884, f. 302-303. For the British, the challenge was deemed part of the consequences of being "the Colossus" that dominated the outer world. In face of other challenges, including the Irish rebellion, the Afghan wars, the Boers, Mahdists and Egypt, the German challenge in Africa seemed modest to most observers. See PRO, FO, 84/1813, no. 152, Enclosed clipping, "Contra Inglattera," *The Liberal*, dated 14 October 1884, f. 3.

<sup>18</sup> For British commissioned surveys of Yemen at the time that have been the staple for historians of the British Empire, Hunter (1968) and Hunter and Sealy (1968).

imperial archives and on maps quickly adopted and manipulated the very tools of state to empower themselves and resist imperial control.<sup>19</sup>

It is only in 1880 that a formal treaty between the British and local allies was actually signed. That is to say, more than six years after officials in Aden scrambled to assert a place in highland politics (Hunter and Sealy 1968: 4-6). Clearly these six years mark a time of considerable weakness on the part of the British (and the Ottomans) as they struggled to insert themselves in the day-to-day affairs of areas well beyond their “sphere of influence.” The treaty signed in 1880 between Aden officials and the Amir of Ḍālī‘, for example, highlights the complex dynamics at play in even a seemingly isolated sub-district located deep in the highlands of what was previously Laḥj territory. Ultimately, it seems both the Ottomans and British agreed that recent examples of locals taking advantage of the tensions in the area threatened the larger interests of both administrations.

For example, the Laḥj, which the Ottoman authorities in Ta‘izz fully accepted was under British protection, had witnessed numerous attempts by competing communities to infiltrate neighbouring districts in what constituted dangerous provocations that often resulted in open gun battles. More troubling, these inter-community rivalries spilled over into to the rich agricultural land belonging to villages located in the Qa‘ṭabah valley. This region was under the Ottomans’

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<sup>19</sup> This process by which conditions on the ground transformed how Ottoman administrators like Aḥmed Muḥtar Pasha would run Yemen is clear once early efforts to impose outside models of governance failed. BBA, Irade Meclis-i Mahsus 1922, Aḥmed Muḥtar Pasha’s report to the Meclis-i Vükela, dated 23 Zilkade 1289 [22 January 1873], docs.1 and 2.

protection and Ottoman clients in Qa‘ṭabah warned that they would not stand still. The threat of a trans-regional war erupting galvanized a new form of communication between the two imperial administrations, and in so doing, also transformed the way both empires interacted with locals. It seems both parties agreed on a scheme to avoid future escalation that entailed incorporating the local inhabitants by way of formal treaty and thus create via local proxies, a string of larger communities, “tribes,” who would then be administratively managed out of Aden. One of these treaties was signed in 1880, which in theory gave someone the British designated as the Amīr of Ḍālī‘ more local authority in the hope that through him and his allies, the British could assure no future entanglements with the Ottomans (Gavin 1975: 200-2).

Such arrangements immediately introduced new problems. For one, the money and weapons the newly created polity in Ḍālī‘ received from the British were quickly being used to bully non-compliant neighbouring villages. The subsequent readjustment of local power created a sudden new set of violent confrontations that rested on control over smuggling routes in and out of Ottoman-controlled areas. Whether or not it was their intention, as a result of their formal alliance with the Amīr of Ḍālī‘, the British were now directly involved in a set local rivalries that actually opened up a new set of opportunities for Aden. Officials in Aden realized, perhaps after conversations with the Amīr of Ḍālī‘, that they could actually control some of the lucrative caravan trade passing through these areas; the authorities sent out several expeditions over the following years to conduct surveys of the region that ultimately resulted in expanding their range of influence in the larger region. The unintended result of signing a stopgap treaty with the Amīr of Ḍālī‘ was the signing of numerous agreements with the so-called “shaykhs” of Baysī, ‘Amīrī, ‘Alawī and Ḥawshabī. Over the next ten years, these newly ordained polities (eventually codified

in “Protectorate treaties) would make up the British frontier zone that became the future borders of South Yemen.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, the treaties that were intended to strengthen local and state collaboration set off another scramble for influence among locals. Between 1885 and 1900, against British intentions, these treaties (and the subsequent distribution of stipends and highly sought-after rifles) in fact resulted in social disruption and a number of inter-related power-struggles that undermined communal hierarchies. As large numbers of communities along recently established trade routes protected by Ottoman troops came under increasing attack, authorities in Istanbul realized the British, often through local proxies, were threatening Ottoman control of commercial activity from the Ta‘izz valley down into Ḍālī‘. Such perceived threats forced Ottoman authorities to interpret the British activities in the highlands, and especially these “treaties” they advertised to their Ottoman counterparts as markers of a new period of British aggression, not the stopgap measures they had agreed upon to stop locals from threatening regional stability.<sup>21</sup> Once again, largely as a result of local activity, what had been at its early stages a fine example of imperial cohabitation was turning into a source of years of tensions. In other words, locals both manipulated imperial states’ sensibilities and ultimately dictated for long periods of time the events in Southern Arabia (Blumi 2009b).

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<sup>20</sup> Ottoman officials were opposed to such activities almost immediately; their complaints lasted well into the formal process of delineating a frontier between the two empires discussed below. BBA, Meclis-i Vükelâ Mazbatakları, 106/89, dated 28 Rebiyülahir 1321 [25 July 1903].

<sup>21</sup> BBA, HR.SYS, 90/7, London Embassy to Said Pasha, no. 15212/111, dated London, 14 May 1892.

As events increasingly disrupted the regional economy and strained relations between the two empires, officials in Bombay suggested a new form of delimitation of territory was needed. Such measures were not necessarily acknowledge solutions to such problems and any frontier delineated on a map would require convincing Ottoman officials that such an innovation was needed. Here officials in Bombay and Aden appear to have taken the initiative by applying pressure on the Ottoman administration in Ta‘izz by allowing the smuggling of weapons into Ottoman Yemen. In time, this crude move would backfire as the influx of modern rifles actually limited the capacity of both the British and Ottoman to use military force to “discipline” local subordinates in the future. Indeed, the new supply chains created with the increasing demand for these weapons led back to the Horn of Africa, which by the 1880s was firmly under the influence of Italian and French administrations. By the late 1890s, Italian and French manipulation of smuggling and piracy dramatically changed the situation in Yemen, yet another lesson from the past that should serve as a warning to the United States and their European allies that their interventions in Yemen tomorrow may lead to some unanticipated (and unwanted) consequences.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Events over the period of 1900 to 1911 represented a window of opportunity for Italy in particular, who would eventually establish an alliance with a local power-broker in Mukhā by the name of ‘Umar Salim, and as demonstrated earlier, with Idrīsī to the north. BBA, HR.SYS, 1568/2. For a detailed report on the French connection in Yemen’s weapons trade that also secured them political leverage see BBA, Y.MTV, 238/82, dated 14 Şevval 1320 [15 January 1903].

In the short term, the scheme worked and the British and the Ottomans formally agreed to form a joint commission that would eventually delimit a boundary and establish a working frontier. Ironically, the wording of these initial declarations of intent emphasized that one of the rationales for this unprecedented procedure was the mutual concern with the problem of smuggling, something a formal border would theoretically help resolve.<sup>23</sup> While those officials and local allies who manipulated British policy got what they wanted with the agreement to establish a border, their interactions with locals in the vain hope of “manipulating” events on the ground seems to have backfired in the end. The borders were coming, but the price for the agreement between the Ottomans and British empires was subsequent years of influence peddling and claims and counter claims all vulnerable to local manipulation. Indeed, from the boundary commission’s first meeting in February 1902 until April 1905, the empowerment of local agents of history is clear and the scramble for control by both empires in face of a now heavily armed set of constituencies permanently reshaped the way the Ottomans and British operated in Yemen.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> IOR, L/P &S 10/63, P.J. Maitland, The Political Resident, Aden to Sir W. Lee-Warner, dated Aden, 6 November 1901 and enclosures.

<sup>24</sup> All too often, the diplomatic exchanges taking place in this period would use rhetoric that denigrated local actors, calling their actions “illegal,” and ostensibly denying their right of participation. These so-called illegal activities involved a number of actors who were operating in a field of logic that carried a great deal of importance on the ground but increasingly did not register in the language of empire. This is the beginning of a tragic disconnect that I would suggest constitutes the real “beginning of the end” for the British and Ottoman empires.

Something the Americans should consider as they expand their “war on terror” to Yemen and the

The weapons local communities were able to secure from smugglers were of course mostly directed at competing communities, even at factions within the same family. The end result was an even greater number of stakeholders emerged who increasingly learned to lobby both the Ottoman and British border commissions for support. In this context, any overture for support potentially meant a claim of “influence” that could help in the delineation of a frontier. The Ottomans, in particular, proved adept at pre-empting any British claim to areas by evoking these temporary alliances. Moreover, locally-based Ottoman officials erected symbols of direct administration to reinforce their claims. Throughout this period of time, Ottoman officials are placing troops in villages that welcomed them and erecting forts on the land of allies to lay claim to these areas when the boundary commission came to draw a border.

In time, British authorities recognized that if they did not clearly designate areas of influence on a map which they could use to reinforce their claims, these Ottoman tactics would completely reorder the Aden highlands. The central problem facing the British in this regards was the fact that the only available maps of the areas under potential dispute were that produced by one Colonel Wahab in the 1880s. These maps were both out-dated and ambiguous considering all that had happened among local communities since the 1880s. Wahab himself, a veteran of the

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larger Red Sea. For a detailed report see BBA, YA. HUS, 418/65, dated 16 Rebiyülahir 1319 [2 August 1901]. Further disturbances in the formalities of power recently established in Bombay caused a rise in tensions among locals and British officials, who requested an increasing number of troops to be dispatched along the still unmarked frontier. BBA, YA. HUS, 418/66, dated 17 Rebiyülahir 1319 [3 August 1901].

region and Aden's chief negotiator, complained that the India Office misunderstood far-away Yemen through "misinterpretations" of his maps.<sup>25</sup> For veteran officials like Wahab, the British needed to investigate "actual circumstances" on the ground, which had dramatically changed since he last visited the areas in the 1880s. Wahab and superiors in Aden thus lobbied the authorities in Bombay immediately send out a new map-drawing commission that would help negotiators reinforce any subsequent British claims with documentary evidence that the Ottomans would have to accept.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Col. Wahab argued, as I do in this book, that context, not the "statistical and ethnographic" generalities of state bureaucracies, is crucial to understanding the motivations of these locals.

Understanding the direction of Wahab's thinking, the Ottomans displayed confidence that they could counter any claim made in Bombay/London with documentation of their own. In the months leading up to the first set of boundary commission meetings, Ottoman officials toured the region collecting the very kind of evidence that would reinforce claims their claims that past treaties signed between the British and locals were not necessarily clearly translated on the map. As Ottoman officials and their local allies were so successful over the years with recruiting villages once assumed to be under the authority of British allies the Sultān of Laḥj and his subordinate, the Amīr of Ḍālī', for example, Istanbul was beginning to claim that the entire topography of local power had changed since the 1880s. Specific to the cases of the Laḥj and Ḍālī', the "sovereigns" the British claimed had authority in the region were in fact marginalized

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<sup>25</sup> IOR, R/20/E/233, Wahab to Secretary to Governor of India, dated Aden, 16 May 1902.

<sup>26</sup> IOR, R/20/E/233, Wahab to Governor of India, Foreign Department, dated Dhali', 7 April 1902.

in an area that would become the biggest point of contention, the Ḥumaydī and Aḥmadī cluster of villages.

As far as the Ottomans were concerned, their ally in area, by way of his command of several forts and his ability to charge local taxes, had the only real claim to authority in the region.<sup>27</sup> It also appears that the actual 1880s map first introduced by the British to make certain early claims actually reinforced Ottoman claims as they depicted the Ḥumaydī and Aḥmadī areas, even further into so-called British spheres of influence, were not under British allied control at that time.<sup>28</sup> The subsequent negotiations with the Ottomans over how to exactly define the boundary separating each party's sphere of influence were thus based on entirely different sets of documentation. The Ottomans would prove even more aggressive in these early stages by making the historical claims that allies in the Ḥawshabī, Ḥumaydī and Aḥmadī areas had long formed part of the Ottoman's sphere of influence.<sup>29</sup> Even more important was the support they

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<sup>27</sup> For early reference to this position see BBA, Y.PRK.UM, 22/93, Meḥmed Ziya to Palace, dated 27 Mayıs 1307 [8 June 1891].

<sup>28</sup> IOR, R/20/E/234, Wahab to Secretary of Governor of India, dated 13 June 1902.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, as reported by Col. Wahab, the chief liaison for the Government of India in the negotiations, Ottoman troops and their local allies were collecting taxes in key districts—Ḥumaydah, 'Amrah and Wadī Safīyyah—that constituted a significant threat to road network leading to Aden. IOR, R/20/E/233, Wahab to Secretary to the Governor of India, dated 23 April 1902 and summary of Wahab's reports in IOR, R/20/E/233, Political Resident to Political Department in Bombay, dated Aden, 24 April 1902.

gave a local ally named Muqbīl as he aggressively pursued alliances prior to the actual process of delineating a frontier (Blumi 2004).

What changed the dynamics on the ground was a set of insurgencies in several regions of Ottoman Yemen. In part a product of British machinations, these insurgencies along the Tihāmah coast, Zaydī highlands and the ‘Asīr ultimately led to a number of capitulation by the Ottoman authorities to British demands in 1903. Among the prizes was formal control of all of the Dālī‘ plateau, including all the previously mentioned areas of contention.<sup>30</sup> The process of delineating borders in the Ḥujarīyyah would clearly have long-term consequences for all parties involved. Perhaps the most unexpected was the opportunities the frontiers offered locals. In time, the less-than-servile activism of local communities readjusting to new contingencies created by the boundaries meant the political and economic parameters of empire were constantly being negotiated at times when the two imperial states simply wanted to regulate and ultimately draw revenue from their territories.<sup>31</sup> As a result of these unwanted local factors, the roots of the modern frontiers of southern Arabia as well as the very nature of the states meant to enforce them were laid.

The borders of empire in the end were the result of bureaucratic reactions to indigenous agency. It is clear that initially, the two powers had simply wanted to avoid confrontation in Yemen and

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<sup>30</sup> IOR, L/P&S/10/65, No.1, “Memorandum on the Boundary of the British Protectorate near Aden,” dated Foreign Office, 3 January 1903.

<sup>31</sup> IOR, L/P&S/10/66, No. 1, R.A. Wahab, Commissioner, Aden Boundary Commission to Government of India, dated Aden, 20 March 1904.

until 1901 would not countenance drawing a border. This hesitation in laying down formal boundaries in Yemen should give historians and social scientists pause: the formal need for borders was the consequence of local politics. Drawing from this understanding of the process, British and Ottoman reluctance to reconfigure Yemen's physical and political geography could be the source of serious theoretical rethinking of the entire paradigm of the modern imperial project. This dynamic takes on similar trajectories in the 1990s with the formal delineation of the Saudi-Yemeni boundary.

Traditionally, the operating principle of territorial sovereignty—*Uti Possidetis*—served as the foundation of the international system. Unfortunately for many peoples of the world, British military ascendancy upset that principle.<sup>32</sup> Britain began to assert its military advantages in poorly defended corners of Arabia and Africa by mobilizing previously established channels of patronage among local potentates or merchants who depended on trade with Bombay, while at the same time asserting the new and dangerous principle of military domination over previously recognized Ottoman claims to sovereignty in much of Arabia.

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<sup>32</sup> Steven Ratner (1996: 594-5) suggested a more appropriate rendition of the principle—*uti possidetis de facto*—to accurately reflect the militaristic spirit of the period. According to Ratner, the principle of *Uti Possidetis de Facto* traces its origins to medieval states that mutually recognized the logic of military conquest and the asserted right of ownership based on might. In the course of the nineteenth century, the desertion of *uti possidetis* for a modified version of the medieval foundations of the modern world would eventually prove disastrous for Africa and the Middle East.

Originating from Roman law, the mantra “as you possess, so you possess” (*uti possidetis, ita possidetis*) was an undesirable means to accommodate the multiplicity of claimants to Europe’s overseas territories. Simple military occupation of a land did not guarantee the smooth administration of communities that were heterogeneous and enjoyed a long history of autonomy from state administration. The evolution of the principle *uti possidetis, ita possidetis* can be understood, therefore, as a product of the accommodation of states that appropriated territory by military conquest while attempting to ensure some “order” in the transition that locals contested (Kratochwil 1986).

The application of a new set of “universal legal principles” during the course of the events from the 1870s onwards sought to ensure that those states which shared a common interest would limit their future actions for the benefit of all (Joseph 1999). But as would become clear with the “scramble for Africa” in 1884-1885, a precedent had been set with British expansion into the Aden hinterland via “treaties” signed with local “sovereigns” who welcomed British oversight, thereby creating a new set of tensions in the region that shaped new spaces of action for local and regional powers. Recall that such innovations introduced by the British were in reaction to local events in Lahj in the late nineteenth century. Their reaction to increasing ambiguity over who represented whom in these unmarked frontier areas led to a joint British/Ottoman adoption of some kind of border solution, a model that the British would help insert through their behind-the-scenes support of the Sa‘ūd family in the 1920s and early 1930s in the ‘Asīr.<sup>33</sup> What eventually

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<sup>33</sup> British officials tied to Ibn Sa‘ūd had accompanied and advised him during his successful conquest of the Ḥijāz, his defeat of his erstwhile allies the Wahhābīs, the incorporation of their other client state in the region, Idrīsī in 1926 and finally the imposition of the Treaty of Ṭā’if at

became known as the Treaty of Ṭāʾif of 1934, again a product of British machinations through their Saudi surrogate, led to much of the Jizān, Ṣaʿdah, and Najrān areas of the ʿAsīr being ceded to Riyād. We now turn to exploring in more detail the events that instigated the imposition of these concessions to the new Saudi state and their long-term consequences on the region's stability.

### **The Modern Saudi-Yemen Border**

In Ṣaʿdah province today, much of the violence increasingly covered in the media takes place within the territories of communities historically straddling the frontiers of Saudi Arabia and Yemen. One of the border areas covered in this chapter is located in parts of Ṣaʿdah province that constitute valuable farm and pasture land belonging to long-established communities who traditionally maintained commercial properties in the principal town of the region, Najrān. Not only were these Zaydī and Ismāʿīlī communities legally connected to these lands, neither the Yemeni nor Saudi states had the means to formally subjugate the area, thereby making any formal delineation of a border between two sovereigns difficult for all of the twentieth century. In recognition of the logistical limitations of both states, the Ṭāʾif Treaty of 1934 simply ignored the sticky question of sovereignty; the treaty allowed for the inhabitants of the region to freely pass back and forth across a “boundary” that would be marked but never enforced.<sup>34</sup> The local

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Yemen's Imām Yaḥyā's expense in 1934. British Legation Dispath to Foreign Office, No. 209, dated Jeddah, 18 July 1934, in Ingrams and Ingrams (1993: 8: 187) .

<sup>34</sup> The actual border that had been “temporarily” approved by the victorious Ibn Saʿūd and the defeated Imām Yaḥyā only delineated a frontier up to Jabal al-Thar; all points east, including the

dynamic, in other words, dictated the nature of state building policies and, as in the South of Yemen, frustrated the British as they attempted to solidify their influence in the region via their partner Ibn Sa‘ūd in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>35</sup>

The media has largely distorted the nature of the Ṣa‘dah conflict today, increasingly making it synonymous to the Ḥūthī movement when in fact it is largely the bi-product of one of these ill-conceived, lingering legacies of an era which delineated sovereignty over territory to parties who had limited actual authority. Over the last decade, for example, this once porous zone of commerce over which the peoples known as Wā’ilah, who are mostly Zaydī, and the mostly Isma‘īlī Yām freely traded, grazed livestock and cultivated cash crops like fruits and *qāt*, has become the centre of Saudi state efforts to change its border management regime. As a result, the Ṣa‘dah region and its inhabitants have been targeted for new forms of regulation which are designed to directly inhibit the pursuit of their daily lives.

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lands in question belonged to communities known in the literature as the Wā’ilah and Wada‘a who are extensions of the Bakīl federation (Gingrich and Heiss 1986).

<sup>35</sup> The details of this relationship/partnership are still poorly studied but even after a cursory look at the published documents, it is clear a much more active British team played a role in the territorial expansion of their Saudi partner in the 1920s and 1930s. This expansion was all at the expense of the Hāshimites, Rashīdī, Idrīsī, and Mutawakkil in Yemen. Among others involved in these British machinations were Philby, a close confidant of Ibn Sa‘ūd. See Philby (1939: 251-9, 431-2) and “Summary of Statements made by Mr. Philby about his Expedition to Shabwa and beyond,” enclosed in Message to British Minister in Jeddah, no. 16, dated Jeddah, 18 February 1937, found in Schofield (1993: 20: 675-8).

The burdens put on various peoples, like the Wā'ilah, are clear after even a cursory look at what is taking place as a result of Saudi efforts to formalize the boundary with walls, fences and security posts. People once able to travel freely across their lands, for example, have been forced to obtain visas to pass through newly erected fenced areas that constitute an extension of their farm land. Increased attempts by both states to regulate commercial exchanges across "borders" have also led to the disruption of daily lives as families find it increasingly difficult to cultivate their land, maintain wells and lead flocks to seasonal pasture. To add insult to injury, the Saudi state not only began the process of alienating people from their land by actually initiating a formal border treaty that expanded on the 1934 Tā'if Treaty, itself only a temporary agreement renewed every 30 years by both Yemen and Saudi Arabia, but the regime in Riyādh and its United States partner has also pressured the Ṣāliḥ regime to assert formal state authority over the region.

As noted in the limited literature on the Ṣa'dah crisis, there are several possible explanations for the region's indigenous population's persistent hostility to the Saudi and Yemeni states. The most often evoked is once again the doctrinal differences, with the majority of the native population being of Shī'ī and Ismā'īlī heritage while the Saudi state is overwhelmingly Sunni (al-Ḥasan 1993). Before giving too much credence to this "ancient hatred" model, however, there are also lingering issues in the larger Ḥijāz region that links the nature of the smuggling boom economy dominated by natives of the 'Asīr/Najrān/Ṣa'dah, armed militant groups operating within Saudi Arabia and the growing concern with illegal immigration. In part, the sudden decision in 2000 to formalize and then fortify a border area stemmed from an increasingly

worrisome set of regional economic trends that threatened long-term Saudi interests. By the 1990s, Saudi concerns with unified Yemen, for instance, translated into a new effort to reconstitute its borders in order to secure further oil development projects, better regulate the flow of cheap labour that passed through Yemen and finally to halt the infiltration of weapons, drugs and unwanted political activists.

Along with building fences, barriers, and trenches along much of its boundaries (this includes a dispute with Abū Dh[Z]abī which still claims that Saudi Arabia illegally occupies its once shared frontier region with Qatar), Saudi Arabia also started to impose a heavy burden on local life in the entire ‘Asīr province. For one, they have tried to take power away from the mostly Yemeni merchant families who control the gold, currency and weapons trade in the Ḥijāz while undermining other ‘Asīri trading families with strong Shī‘a and especially Ismā‘īlī roots. Restricting the movement of these families’ wealth as well as personnel constitutes a direct threat to the livelihood of the region’s “minority” populations and is as much a part of the war in Ṣa‘dah today as any fanaticism on the part of “brainwashed” *al-Shabāb al Mu’amin*/Believing Youth led by Ḥūthī.

The militarization of the border area even prior to the actual agreements signed with Yemen in 2000 (Bruce 1996), has heightened the sense that people along these borders are under siege and their livelihood threatened. Local communities mobilized their considerable human resources in response. The rise in kidnappings, blockage of highway traffic and other forms of local protest induced a response from the various state and extra-state actors that would have long-term consequences on the region’s stability. After mobilization and persistent efforts to halt what

ostensible became a state-centred land grab at the expense of local communities, the Ṣāliḥ regime began by the late 1990s to assist directly the Saudi enforcement of various border policies, extending a largely Saudi problem into Yemen itself (Whitaker 2000). It seems there was enough diplomatic pressure levied on the Yemeni regime along with the ongoing frustration with local activism to initiate a change in policy from the Ṣāliḥ government.

Ironically, these conflicts originate from a period in the post-Ottoman era that, with the signing of a formal treaty between the Saudis and the remnants of the Idrīsī state in 1926, saw the rise of the Ibn Sa‘ūd state in the Hijāz and eventually into the ‘Asīr. The Makka Treaty of 21 October 1926 signed between King Ibn Sa‘ūd and the successor to Muḥammad Idrīsī, Imām Ḥasan al-Idrīsī, put the Idrīsī Amirate under Saudi protection.<sup>36</sup> The agreement, facilitated by British officials who had maintained relations with both sovereigns since World War I constituted an expansion of Saudi territory through much of the ‘Asīr and the upper reaches of Tihāmah. In November of 1930, this region was annexed by Ibn Sa‘ūd (Schofield 1993: 20: 529). As many locals claim they are trying to do today, the Saudi state had created by coercion the conditions leading to a formal transfer of the ‘Asīr by 1930.

Imām Yaḥyā did not recognize the agreement of 1926 and subsequent annexation in 1930 and may have had considerable support from local merchants seeing nothing good from the expansion of a Najdī dynasty at the expense of the long-established partners in the Hijāz (Schofield 1993: 20: 505; Ingrams and Ingrams 1993: 8: 170). This territorial dispute must have been shaped to a certain extent by the interplay of locals, many of whom were former allies of

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<sup>36</sup> Copy of treaty is in Schofield (1993: 20: 48-9).

Idrīsī but were not opposed to joining Imām Yaḥyā in an eventual struggle with the invading Saudis. This possibility of associating with locals in the ‘Asīr uneasy about being incorporated into a notoriously violent state run by at times religious fanatics most likely gave Yaḥyā the confidence to persist in his territorial claims. His open threats of resistance produced results with the so-called ‘Arū Agreement of 1931, which the Saudis and their British guardians hoped would settle a potential boundary dispute by ceding much of the Tihāmah to Yemen (Tuscon and Quick 1992: 4: 153). In 1933, Saudi Arabia attempted one more time to formally agree with Yaḥyā on a mutually profitable distribution of the old Idrīsī state. Perhaps miscalculating the power of British and Sa‘ūd leverage over ‘Asīrī merchants eager to secure access to the larger world, Yaḥyā remained adamant that he would never concede the Najrān oasis, at the time occupied by loyalists (Schofield 1993: 20: 496).

Perhaps reflective of the sensibilities on the ground, the response to the occupation was a request from Sa‘ūd to either keep Najrān neutral or at least divided it along community lines—the north, linked to the Ismā‘īlī Yām who had recently signed a treaty with Riyāḍ would go to Saudi Arabia while portions of the Wā’ilah territories would go to Yemen (Schofield 1993: 20: 554). War finally broke out when Yaḥyā ignored this last overture. The fighting did not last long because Imām Yaḥyā failed to secure the loyalties of locals long associated with Idrīsī; he signed a truce in February 1934 having lost on the battle field. A formal Treaty of Muslim Friendship and Fraternity was signed in Ṭā’if on 20 May 1934 (Ingrams and Ingrams 1993: 8: 191-228).

Forced to accept Saudi terms, the treaty proved comprehensive.<sup>37</sup> It covered cultural, social, military, economic and political areas. Article Four of the treaty fixed the boundary and sovereignty claims to ‘Asīr, Jizān and Najrān, with emphasis on “tribes” as markers of boundaries, clearly a British intervention, as in the 1905 treaty with Ottomans. Here the confusion over which resident community belonged to which confederation and thus allied with which state shaped the subsequent seventy years. While Ibn Sa‘ūd signed a treaty with both Idrīsī and the Ismā‘īlīs (Yām) based in and around Najrān, the region’s mountainous terrain made it impossible to enforce any formal treaty among the groups of locals who did not recognize the sovereignty of either state at the time. As a result, one particular concession made to reflect this reality would have long-term consequences in the decades to come: Both the Yām and Wā’ilah were allowed to retain the freedom of movement across the borders. These privileges are important because these are the same rights that the Saudi-Yemeni agreement of 2000 discussed below actually revoked (Ingrams and Ingrams 1993: 8: 226-7).

The reason why the border was impossible to formalize in the 1930s was due to a dispute between the Ismā‘īlī Yām who had signed a treaty with King Abd al-‘Azīz bin Sa‘ūd in 1934 in exchange for local protection, and the Wā’ilah who shared with the Yām the Ṣa’dah/Najrān water-sources and agricultural/pasture land. As a result, neither the Saudi nor the Yemeni states could secure absolute authority over the area in the subsequent decades. Without the precise border, years of dispute followed. In this context, these already distinctive communities developed over time new associations as their local and regional orientations shifted with the rise

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<sup>37</sup> Another source to consult regarding the text of the treaty is Tuson and Quick (1992: 4: 336-345).

of a lucrative business in trading locally produced goods as well as smugglers of more illicit materials to and from Saudi Arabia.

Further south, there were immediate consequences for the Yaḥyā regime after the loss of so much territory that many of his northern constituencies associated as part of their sphere of influence. To some current allies of Imām Yaḥyā, the most damning concession given to the Saudis under duress of military defeat was the handing over to Saudi authorities the right to determine who would be granted citizenship and thus “rights” to live in these unmarked borderlands. This loophole opened the gates to social engineering policies that included the migration of Najdī settlers into the border areas.

According to local sources, within months of the formal transfer of sovereignty over Najrān to the Saudis, Najdī interests began to push out natives as they favoured trading to the North. The resulting reorientation of capital flows in the ‘Asīr immediately impacted North Yemeni communities and marginalized non-Najdī merchants based in Najrān and throughout now Saudi-claimed ‘Asīr. The immediate response to this loss of stature within Saudi Arabia requires more research but in Yemen, the decline of local power led to a reordering of loyalties in much of the Ṣa‘dah and Ḥajjah region which in turn led many to consider removing the Imām and placing his younger brother ‘Abdullāh or Aḥmad in his place. The origins of this opposition can partially be traced back to the rise of the Shabāb movement which found considerable support from the economic elite of the northern highlands directly affected by the Ṭā’if Treaty. As the merchants relying heavily on the trade linking coastal areas to the hinterland, they were most directly

affected and thus made up an important part of the Free Yemeni Movement from 1935 onward (Douglas 1987: 23-68).

While the treaty in many ways reveals considerable vulnerability and acknowledged lack of authority in the region, the fact that the larger ‘Asīr region had been drawn into the Saudi sphere of influence undermined the Imām’s credibility. In this respect, the Ṭā’if Treaty included a clause that proves crucial to understanding the evolving dynamics of the current Ṣa‘dah conflict. The clause provided for the possibility of future amendments and lasted for 20 lunar years. In other words, it may be renewed or modified during the six months preceding its expiration. Nothing it turns out was final here, the treaty showed an understanding the power ebbs/flows, local dynamics can help change the tide, something the Jeddah Treaty of 2000 tries to erase (al-Shihārī 1979: 16).

In March of 1953 the two monarchies renewed the treaty but by 1960, the Saudi’s renounced the treaty in reaction to Yaḥyā’s desperate attempt to accommodate shifting dynamics within his country. This was a period when the Free Yemeni Movement had grown in strength within the Imām’s government and among the larger population. Influenced by pan-Arabism, the Free Yemeni Movement’s demands for the reincorporation of all of the ‘Asīr previously ceded to the Saudi state in 1934, the growing nationalism within Yemen in regard to formerly “lost” territories sparked a period of tensions between the two monarchies (Ingrams and Ingrams 1993: 14: 64). This eventually took on the contours of the Arab Cold War with the Imām quickly realizing an alliance with the Saudi state was needed in face of the imminent threat posed by Egypt’s Nasser who was cultivating a relationship with these various reformist groups in Yemen.

The subsequent war by proxy in Yemen lasted from 1962 to 1970 and indelibly changed the region forever. In this new context, the border issue persisted until 2000.

On previous occasions even the Yemeni state condemned efforts by the Saudi state to retract the “special privileges” granted those communities living along the borders. Clearly, the Imam’s government felt compelled to speak on behalf of local communities facing disruptions in their daily lives. As far back as 1960, the Yemeni state has used the various side agreements preserved in the Ṭā’if agreements to defend the interests of regional communities (Ingrams and Ingrams 1993: 14: 64). Not only did tensions flair, but Yemen and Saudi Arabia even fought a war as late as January 1994 over the mistreatment of locals whose special role in the region had been threatened by Saudi attempts to formalize the frontier.<sup>38</sup>

Although both North and South Yemen would periodically resort to challenging the legality of the Ṭā’if Accord and demand a new treaty, it was not until unification in 1990 that Yemen could meaningfully exert the right kind of pressure on its larger neighbour. Periodic clashes since unification along the poorly marked border, especially in the Jizān/Ḥajjah coastal zones, exposed Saudi weaknesses in face of a new regional power. As a counter to Yemen’s growing potential as the region’s future power, the Saudis actively supported opposition groups in Yemen that have contributed to the destabilization of the country since unification. It is in this context of heightened tensions, often resulting in open warfare between the two country’s armed forces, that the new treaty of 2000 was signed (Enazy 2002).

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<sup>38</sup> Coincidentally, the fighting around al-Buga‘ in 1994, located just east of the unmarked border, is the same area where much of today’s fighting is taking place.

Explaining why the two parties, Ṣālīḥ and his Saudi counterparts, invested in this potentially disruptive alliance is explored further in the next chapter. What is crucial to remember for the moment is that such a move ultimately changed the relationship each state had with their respective allies/partners in the ‘Asīr/Najrān/Ṣa‘dah/Ḥajjah borderland. Perhaps the single most important decision on the part of the Saudis, for example, was the revocation of the rights of the Wā’ilah communities that straddled the unmarked mountains and whose de facto sovereignty over this area included the pastures and water sources of the Ṣa‘dah and Najrān provinces. The still unexplained reason for this policy shift towards confronting communities like the Wā’ilah over free movement across an unmarked boundary would have a devastating effect on local stability.

As subsequent generations would demonstrate, neither party at the Ṭā’if accords in 1934 really had any right to sign away this land; it was neither occupied nor conquered by either state and remains to this day firmly within the control of various communities living quite autonomously from the Saudi or Yemeni states. Today we see an attempt by both states to change that by formally imposing principles of state sovereignty in face of long-held ownership claims by the inhabitants. Sadly, this departure from a hands-off approach that for decades had existed is leading to numerous tensions. This border’s function for 70 years reflected the fact that people living in affected areas were allowed free movement across these borders. Over the years, these people—among them the Yām, Wā’ilah, Yāfi‘ and Wazīr—became entrenched as merchants, farmers and the guardians of a labour corridor linking Africa’s cheap labour to the larger Persian/Arab Gulf. The origins of the conflict in Ṣa‘dah today thus require some study beyond

the doctrinal schisms supposedly animating the Middle East today, as it is impossible to appreciate the range of possible explanations/justifications for resistance unless we see it from the perspective of locals. To them, both Saudi and Yemeni state moves into the region constitute a quintessential land grab at local expense.

Predictably, the dominant political figure in the Wā'ilah region, Shaykh bin Shāj'i, organized protests for almost two years once it became clear what were the Saudi's intentions with formalizing the border.<sup>39</sup> These protests resulted in numerous open confrontations between bin Shāj'i's more than 3000 man militia and Saudi/Yemen government officials (Abd al-'Atī 2000). Using the media, evoking patriotism and community honour, bin Shāj'i was a constant thorn in the side of Ṣāliḥ's government.<sup>40</sup> When the actual border markings were being installed in early 2002, for example, bin Shāj'i led a number of raids that literally blew up the newly placed posts.<sup>41</sup> His actions were not isolated works of a disgruntled local, however. Government officials and members of the Yemen political and cultural elite shared similarly articulated amazement that the Ṣāliḥ regime would allow for such a disruptive set of agreements to be implemented.<sup>42</sup> As would happen with the Ḥūthī several years later, the charismatic opposition

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<sup>39</sup> *Yemen Times*, 2 July 2000.

<sup>40</sup> He occasionally had his "open letters" to Ṣāliḥ published in local media, including the English-language *Yemen Times*, "Bin Shaji' Appeals to President Saleh," *Yemen Times*, 19 February 2001.

<sup>41</sup> "Tribesmen Blew-Up Border Demarcation Marks," *Yemen Times*, 21 January 2002.

<sup>42</sup> "Jeddah Treaty 2000 Did Injustice to Yemen," *Yemen Times*, 17 July 2000.

of a local captured the imagination of a larger audience who could not accept the underlying justifications presented to them by the Ṣāliḥ regime.<sup>43</sup>

What is perhaps the most important aspect to this discussion, therefore, is Ṣāliḥ's willingness to abandon local interests for larger ones that would enable his regime to now enter into negotiations that could eventually lead Yemen into the GCC while destroying the local economy. It is clear, therefore, that the resistance to the changing order in 2000 is not simply an issue of Shī'ī fanatics resisting the legitimate claims of authority by the state and the rest of Yemeni society. There are serious local concerns threatened by Saudi/Yemeni state border enforcement policies and an abandonment of local interests by the Yemeni states.

Around the same time, the Yām who live in the fertile Najrān valley, today located inside Saudi territory, got into a public confrontation with Saudi state officials over their religious freedoms. By early April of 2000 public protests among Najrān-native's decried open persecution by officials linked to the Saudi government. The simmering tensions that were manifesting on the Yemeni side of the frontier exploded in Najrān on 23 April 2000, when a confrontation between Saudi forces and locals took place after the so-called morality policy continued to arrest local Isma'īlī clerics. After a shoot-out, leaving several Isma'īlīs dead, the Isma'īlī community erected defences around the community's main spiritual complex in Khushaiwah. Over the subsequent

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<sup>43</sup> Shaykh bin Shāḥ'ī Interview, *Yemen Times*, 3 September 2000.

weeks, several dozen Isma‘īlīs were arrested, leaving an ongoing tension that certainly contributes to the conflict along the frontier (HRW 2008a: 19-28).<sup>44</sup>

In response to the growing tensions within Saudi territory which clearly concerned the regime, measures were introduced by December of 2000 that clearly marked a new seriousness in Riyāḍ to compel Ṣāliḥ’s government to fully assist in implementing the Jeddah Treaty. In many ways, the Saudi’s bought the Yemeni state’s compliance. For one, concessions given to the Ṣāliḥ government for signing the treaty included the reduction of Yemen’s debt to Saudi Arabia, and a new loan of \$350 million to finance development projects. Despite all of this, it would take the Yemeni government years before it would actually set up its first border posts on its side of the border in the ‘Asīr.<sup>45</sup> There are far deeper issues at play, as demonstrated with the local violence emerging during and immediately after the formal signing of the Jeddah Treaty.

There has been barely any work on this important story in Southern Arabian history, and with the exception of a few ethnographies of the various communities in the area, it is extremely hard to fully appreciate the individual dynamics at play. That being said, the work that is available helps us challenge the paradigmatic approach adopted by the media and the Ṣāliḥ, Saudi and US

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<sup>44</sup> These tensions would play out in many forms over the subsequent years, including several violent confrontations between locals and the police and even assassination attempts against top Saudi officials like the interior minister, Prince Nayif, who was accused of being the architect of this growing policy to persecute the Isma‘īl of Najrān (Coker 2009).

<sup>45</sup> “Follow-up to 2000 Jeddah Treaty: Yemen gets border posts,” 13 February 2005, *Yemen Times*.

governments regarding the Şa‘dah tragedy. In this regard, Lichtenthaler’s work (2000) presents the only real study of the communities involved in the ongoing war in Şa‘dah that offers a possible set of analytical tools to understand the conflict outside the normative claims of Iranian influence. While researched and written prior to the actual imposition of the Jeddah Treaty of 2000 that finalized a boundary between Saudi Arabia and Yemen, the study highlights that any attempt to regulate the Wā’ilah territories and thus impose restrictions on travel would likely cause tension.

As demonstrated in Lichtenthaler’s work, the peoples in these areas affected by the frontier are not simple agriculturalists and pastoralists. The region has long been a gateway for the trade to and from the two countries, in particular after the completion of the paved highway in 1979. Prior to 2000 this meant trade flowed with minimal government oversight, creating important market niches in the trade of weapons (the *Suq al-Talh* being the region’s largest gun market), labour markets as African and Yemeni migrants passed to access work in the Oil-rich GCC countries. Similarly, a massive vehicle market existed in Şa‘dah and much of the fresh fruits consumed in southern Saudi cities came from the fertile valleys that are now besieged by Saudi, Yemeni and US aircraft and artillery.

The Treaty of Jeddah, therefore, was flawed as it opens up plenty of potential conflicts in the future.<sup>46</sup> The more the Saudi and more recently, Yemeni state try to regulate the trade that has historically kept this region thriving, the more such policies clash directly with very big,

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<sup>46</sup> See 26 September June 22, 2000, pages 8-9 for Arabic text of treaty.

entrenched commercial interests.<sup>47</sup> Paradigmatically, as argued throughout, the conflict with locals and the subsequent chaos may also serve the strategic interests of various actors. For instance, the current crisis in Ṣa‘dah may have opened up that window of opportunity for the Saudis to actually expand into Yemeni territory. This is certainly what who hail from the region fear. For his part, Ṣāliḥ may not be fully appreciative of the situation in which more chaos and societal collapse could be an invitation for Saudis to justify to expand its territorial reach. Reports of Riyāḍ creating a buffer zone 10 kilometres within Yemeni territory may be an early indication of this.<sup>48</sup> The documented forced resettlement of the Isma‘īlī population along the entire border area, something akin to what happened in New Orleans, may be another.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Despite the ongoing war along the entire ‘Asīr border the amount of smuggling of drugs, weapons and migrants has clearly not abated. According to officials, Saudi forces had arrested over the second half of 2009 127,875 “infiltrators,” 2,206 smugglers along with 30kg of gunpowder, narcotic substances found in 2,140 cars and large amounts of handguns (al-Majid 2009). This kind of business has clearly not abated, despite the fact the border has been increasingly fortified since 2004, see for example: “Saudi foils bid to smuggling arms on Yemen border,” *Khaleej Times*, 3 September 2005; “Saudi Arabia: Terrorist Groups Trading Drugs for Money and Weapons,” *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 5 September 2005; “Weapons Haul in Najran,” *Arab News*, 26 November 2005; “Security Tightened across Yemeni-Saudi Borders,” *Yemen Observer*, 28 February 2006;

<sup>48</sup> The Saudis now admit that it has created a 10 km “kill zone” within Yemeni territory (Lyon 2009), something which enrages Yemeni opposition figures and may even lead to greater sympathy for the Ḥūthī. As mentioned by Ḥasan Zayid, the leader of the Joint Meeting Parties,

There are of course other external factors contributing to these conflicts. While the popular assertion that Iran is somehow naturally involved because the principals are “Shī’ī,” this argument is far less useful than considering the commercial windfall from such a set of events. Firstly, huge contracts have been awarded to EADS (\$2.3 billion) to effectively design, implement and help police the Saudi frontier.<sup>50</sup> As in other “hot zones” around the world, the conflicted interests of the military industry and diplomacy are increasingly subsumed under the pressures for profits. The growing role of the United States in this conflict also creates confusion in the analysis of events as policies of deception, denial and the inter-relation between vilifying Iran and promoting the “war on terror” has distorted the situation in southwest Arabia considerably. Today, as a result, it is basically impossible to find in the analysis of events any reference to local interests that are not framed in Shī’ī, Ḥūthī terms; as a result, Yemenis of various political colorizations are beginning to express their frustration.<sup>51</sup>

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Yemen’s largest opposition coalition party, Yemenis are beginning to read into this policy as expansionism at Yemen’s expense (Yemen Post 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Official, the forced relocation of upwards of 250 villages along the border is for the safety of the inhabitants, informants however fear their relocation north of Abhā marks a policy of permanently changing the demography of the region (Nebhay 2009).

<sup>50</sup> “Fencing the Kingdom: EADS Lands Huge Saudi Border Deal,” *Defense Industry Daily*, 19 July 2009.

<sup>51</sup> The online source Yementoday has provided a useful analysis of the growing US interest in Yemen as it begins to see “security threats” emerging from the Ḥūthī activities in the region, *Yementoday Net*, 16 December 2009.

As evidenced by the immediate opposition led by Shaykh bin Shāj‘i between 2000 and March 2002 against the imposition of the Saudi border, a number of currents pre-dated the emergence of the Ḥūthī family who clearly tapped into an already dynamic set of issues when they emerged in 2004. The rise of the Ḥūthī, in other words, can only be appreciated when considering that bin Shāj‘i would be murdered for his opposition in 2002 when his car crashed in March.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, it is forgotten that up to 3000 heavily armed men and a growing support from neighbours, including members in Yām territories long assumed loyal to the Saudi are contributing to a varied and multi-dynamic resistance that has taken on a much broader significance than simply being a fringe movement inspired by a religious crackpot. Even after bin Shāj‘i’s death, for example, a movement around the Wā’ilah community continued to agitate and resist the border. In February of 2004 the Wā’ilah leadership publicly renewed their opposition to the border in a statement offered to the media that stated the barrier being erected, despite local protests, was cutting off owners from their property. Attempts at offering compensation were rejected as leading members of both communities reiterated that nothing will get in the way of local agreements between Wā’ilah and Yām. This suggests members of the Yām were also agitated by early 2004 and willing to challenge both Saudi and Yemeni state efforts to formalize the frontier.<sup>53</sup>

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<[http://www.yementoday.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1282:2009-12-16-06-49-29&catid=31:2008-11-19-20-06-48&Itemid=46](http://www.yementoday.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1282:2009-12-16-06-49-29&catid=31:2008-11-19-20-06-48&Itemid=46)> (Accessed 22 December 2009).

<sup>52</sup> *Yemen Times*, 17 March 2002 and *al-Quds al-‘Arabī*, 8 March 2002.

<sup>53</sup> *al-Quds al-‘Arabī*, 9 February 2004.

When pressed on this matter in a Saudi-owned London-based paper, officials rejected the idea that concrete and steel pipes constitutes a separation fence that resembled the one being laid down by Israel in Palestine. Obviously sensitive of the accusation, Saudi officials insisted the barrier was laid solely on Saudi territory, clearly missing the point that it is not about Saudi or Yemeni territory, but local control of their land.<sup>54</sup> In this context, the local representatives reiterated the threat of “war” if the barriers stretching from Jabal Hubāsh to Jabal al-Farah were not removed.<sup>55</sup> This is the context from which the Ḥūthī rebellion emerges.

Up until November of 2007 at least, periodic efforts to resolve the Ṣa‘dah crisis ran into problems because of objections from the very Wā’ilah community that resisted the Jeddah Treaty in the first place. Led by Shakyh bin Shāj‘i al-Tuhāmī and later Shakyh al-Dhurāmī who both demand equal treatment from the Saudi authorities that would assure their free movement across borders, as stipulated by Tā’if Treaty,<sup>56</sup> the resistance was still misinterpreted by late 2007 because of the poor quality of the analysis.

While the Ṣāliḥ regime and its Saudi and American allies crudely attempt to confuse the issue through innuendo, staged seizures of “Iranian” weapons and claims that members of Lebanon’s Ḥizbullāh are fighting alongside “their Shī‘ī brethren,” the fact that the Ḥūthī, Yām, Wā’ilah, Baqim, Jawf and Ḥaraḍ are all fighting the same forces of change suggests this regional conflict is one that can easily turn into something much bigger. The more the Saudi’s impose new

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<sup>54</sup> *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, 9 February 2004.

<sup>55</sup> *Yemen Times*, 12 February 2004.

<sup>56</sup> See *Yemen Post*, 26 November 2007.

barriers to local trade, as along the villages of Ḥaraḍ, Tuwāl, Masfaq and Khawjarah in early 2008, while deporting 60,000 “Yemeni Infiltrators” across that Ḥaraḍ border, it is only natural that many whose lives have been ruined through this campaign of expulsion will think long and hard before resigning themselves to an existence in a poorly run refugee camp. In fact, thousands of these people have demonstrated time and again a willingness to join locally-run rebellions, including the Ḥūthī, to restore some dignity to their lives (Kibsi 2008).

More recently, Shaykh Aḥmad Muḥammad Muqa’it of the Baqim district in Ṣa‘dah also resisted these developments by closing the Ilb border crossing with his men.<sup>57</sup> Much like those who protested the borders earlier, Muqa’it evokes past agreements which seemed to have been ignored due to the post-2000 policies adopted by both the Saudi and Yemeni states. Clearly for these local leaders who have used age-old tactics to gain leverage over the state, this is not a crisis along the frontier that can easily fit the sweeping generalizations used in the media today. It is neither a simple case of Zaydī fanatics following a dead leader or the incapability of the states involved to secure its frontiers. As always, there is a need to contextualize by localizing the scope of analysis.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> See “Saudi-Yemen border closed by Disgruntled Shaykh” *YemenOnline*, 1 March 2009.

<sup>58</sup> It has been reported that the Saudi’s are making strong demands on neighbouring countries to send their best forces to help subdue what may actually be a much larger, region-wide rebellion, even within Saudi territories itself. While Egypt has declined the invitation to send commandos, Jordan has reportedly contributed “several hundred troops,” as a response to reports of Shī‘a members of local armed forces who made up the bulk of the border defence units refusing to engage in the war against the local populations of the Ṣa‘dah region (World Tribune 2009).

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Using this Şa‘dah example to continue our larger discussion on the importance of studying the minutia of local politics, we may conclude that much of the political life of the Şāliḥ regime’s most violent rivals is shaped by their shifting connections to local, regional and international economic forces. When it is understood that considerations such as access to markets, supplies and securing lucrative concessions from external patrons profoundly influence the manner in which neighbouring regions in South Yemen interact, present-day analysts’ flagrant neglect of these factors in the larger context of the Şāliḥ regime’s struggle for power proves frustratingly counter-productive.

The Yemeni state today has become so intertwined with securing economic and thus temporary political leverage over everyone else in the country that potential allies/enemies no longer can afford to wait for Şan‘ā’ to approach them. Rather, they have continued to engage the world around from their specific, local perspective. As in the early twentieth century, even those who are in theory subordinate to regional leaders are capable of exploring new opportunities. Such opportunistic ventures at forging alliances beyond traditional areas of exchange often results in opening up new channels of penetration for foreign interests and at times like these after 9/11, initiate a set of unpredictable contingencies that spiral out of control.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Saudi and Yemeni states were programmed to cartographically erase local existence forever, level/separate pasture lands, water sources, trade, culture and family. Modern institutions inscribed cartographic abstractions that needed to be

enforced, suggesting hegemonic pretensions that required subtle, long-term insinuation. In Saudi-administered ‘Asīr, constant reference to the Saudi dynasty, in the form of naming buildings, reference to the Najd in street names, and evoked on television has yet to be fully negotiated with locals who have strong regional and familial loyalties. The resistance the dynasty’s armies are experiencing in Najrān today are a testament of lingering ambiguities about state sovereignty in the ‘Asīr. The war with the so-called Ḥūthī may thus represent a last effort to formalize over the next decade the Saudization of the ‘Asīr thereby rupturing the links Yemen has with the region. This takes the form of physically removing the Ismā‘īlī Yām from the region while building military bases throughout the region (Morris 2008; HRW 2008a). These acts constitute an unspoken tension in larger Saudi history. Despite efforts to suppress these regional issues, the central mediating factor for the long-term stability of the region remains addressing the needs of the local.

By antagonizing previously entrenched economic interests which relied on traditional trading patterns (as those found throughout Ṣa‘dah today and the ‘Asīr in the late Ottoman era), a number of adjustments among local constituencies can result in the formation of new coalitions that actually threaten to overwhelm entrenched economic and political interests beyond the region. Once the ‘Asīr territories and the entire northern frontier along the modern Saudi border today were closed (or increasingly patrolled), previously innocuous transactions became points of tension. Events in the North of Yemen today thus appear to be as much a reaction to a series of measures that over the course of the 1990s and early twenty-first century, has significantly damaged local commercial activity. In time, new quasi-religious, political or economic associations erected around individuals (Ḥūthī/Shaj’i today, Idrīsī in the past) reflect a real

ability among many emergent leaders to protect local interests. Subsequent heavy-handed efforts to suppress these reactive gestures from locals vis-à-vis state authority inevitably lead to a chain reaction out of which the Ṣāliḥ regime (as the Imām, Ottomans, Saudis and the United States) cannot (and could not) fully control.

Indeed, the Ṣa‘dah conflict has reshaped the coalitions that had formed the basis of the Ṣāliḥ regime’s success in the 1990s to the point where a number of groups linked to the so-called Bakīl “tribal” confederation openly support the rebels. Some have even suggested to willing outside audiences that the war in Ṣa‘dah has turned into a conflict involving the two largest political coalitions in the northern highlands and is far more a struggle for power in all of Yemen than merely involving a Ḥūthī. We may be better served therefore not to accept the blanket naming of this regional conflict as a Ḥūthī or Shī‘ī one. As reported in local newspapers and the ICG (2009: 17-9), open battles between Bakīl and Ḥāshid-connected militias have broadened the significance of the Ṣa‘dah conflict. In the end, recognizing that local constituencies play such an instrumental role in dictating the direction in which the Ṣāliḥ regime would pursue its post-unification policies also helps us reassess the very process of “unification” of Yemen at the end of the Cold War.

But recognizing that local agency is both unpredictable and susceptible to external influence does not ultimately mean we concede that the rise of modern states—especially in the case of the Marxist South Yemen in 1967—is entirely at the mercy of foreign issues. Freeing our analysis of the process of Yemeni “unification” from dependence on external influence as the *sine qua non* of the post-colonial modern state—especially, in this connection, Saudi-dominated political Islam and a new form of economic globalisation—we can appreciate once again how local

factors contribute to two decades of political instability in Yemen. And since we have abandoned simple assertions linking violence in Yemen to primordial affiliations to “tribe” or “sect,” the following, concluding chapter, will prove crucial to introducing a suggestive new method of analysing the post-modern world via a new kind of authoritarianism until now overshadowed by cultural essentialism and “the war on terrorism” policies.