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# Traditional incense traders facing stiff competition

■ Ali Aboluhom

Home to a thriving market for myrrh (*murr*) and frankincense (*luban*) stretching back thousands of years, Southern Arabia has long been known for its rich fragrances. Formed from dried tree resin, the most expensive and sought after varieties are still found growing in Yemen and Oman today.

Myrrh and frankincense were some of the ancient world's most coveted commodities, linking modern-day Yemen into a global network of trade that reached as far as China. Already by the first century AD, the Roman writer Pliny reckoned more than three-thousand tons of incense (*bakhour*) were being imported to the Mediterranean from South Arabia each year.

Yemeni households and markets may still carry the scents of this venerable tradition, but the fragrance industry is no longer what it once was. Its decline began long ago, when early Christian leaders condemned the use of incense as a pagan tradition, but modern globalization has conspired to undermine the trade further. With the emergence of cheaper fragrances from countries in South and East

Asia, myrrh and frankincense now compete with a wide range of alternatives.

Mohammad Raheem, 61, has spent most of his life selling fragranced goods in Old Sana'a's Souk Al-Milh (Salt Market). When he went into the business in the 1970s, he says he only sold homemade incense produced locally, but he recalls when imported fragrances began arriving in Sana'a in the early 1990s from places like India, China and Cambodia.

"Yemeni fragrance is more expensive because of the time needed to extract and prepare the ingredients, compared with synthetic products from abroad that come readymade," he says. Local producers and sellers of traditional incense, such as Raheem, have been struggling to compete ever since the arrival of these cheaper alternatives.

"The process of making ten 100-gram batches of homemade incense can take between a month and two, which adds to the cost, while some ingredients can only be found in the bark of rare trees in isolated places like Socotra island," explains Raheem.

Nonetheless, he says, there is no competing with the quality and craftsmanship of Yemeni fragrance—so long as customers are willing to pay extra for it—and it is a tradition he is proud to keep alive.



Mohammad Raheem, 61, has been working at Old Sana'a's Souk Al-Milh since the 1970s. He says the traditional market has changed considerably since imported products began arriving in the 1990s.



Cambodian and Indian imports offer the most affordable choices, selling for \$20-35 per ounce.



A range of imported products from neighboring countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, selling for \$10-50 per ounce, offer stiff competition to local Yemeni products. Examples of the finest Yemeni fragrances include Al-Sultan, Al-Araesi, and Al-Adni, and sell for between \$50 and \$300 per ounce.



The only locally-produced oud available in Yemen, selling for \$50 per ounce. Raheem says only wealthy clients, who usually buy in bulk of ten to 100 ounces, purchase it for special occasions like weddings and Ramadan celebrations.



Homemade oud, made with a mixture of imported and local products, sells for about \$20 and offers a compromise for those with tight budgets looking for traditional scents.



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Hadi and the south:

## Brothers in arms or a marriage of convenience?

■ Khalid Al-Karimi

Before fleeing the country for Saudi Arabia, Yemen's internationally recognized president, Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, was holed up in Aden, the epicenter of a the separatist Southern Movement. His arrival in Aden following his escape from house arrest on Feb. 21, and the support he received from southern locals and politicians alike, may come as a surprise to anyone familiar with his controversial past.

As a leading military official in independent South Yemen, Hadi fled north following the 1987 civil war there and was a key player in the defeat of Ali Salim Al-Beidh's attempt to regain southern independence in 1994.

Within a year of being appointed defense minister in 1994, President Ali Abdullah Saleh promoted Hadi to vice president. In a position he would hold until Saleh's resignation in 2012, Hadi has remained closely associated with what southern separatists view as a northern occupying regime.

Hadi's endorsement of a six-region federal plan and more recent scandals have not helped relations. On Jan. 19, the Houthi-run TV channel Al-Masira broadcast a phone call between Hadi and his then chief-of-staff, Ahmed Awadh Bin Mubarak, in which Hadi dismissed the Southern Movement. "They are satisfied from within [about federalism] but they are still afraid," said Mubarak. Hadi responded, "I am a southerner and a state representative, they [the

Southern Movement] alone do not represent the south." The channel called the phone call "humiliating for the southern people."

When Hadi arrived in Aden with military-backed Houthi militias in pursuit, however, historical grievances were hastily put aside. The political climate in Yemen today makes such an unlikely alliance necessary, and it is by no means unprecedented—something Saleh's union with the Houthis, a group he waged war with for six years, demonstrates.

But Hadi is also a southerner, just as Saleh is a Zaydi-Shia, and such alliances may also reflect strong regional ties in Yemen that are never fully severed. Indeed many in the south are keen to identify Hadi as a southerner first and foremost, making it easier to forgive his political affiliations and past actions.

"We used to view Hadi as the leader of an occupation, we know what he did in the war against the south in 1994, but he has the right to repent and return home. Lots of southerners were enthusiastic about unity, but later learned it's a mistake," said Ahmed Bamuaalem, a Southern Movement leader and deputy head of the National Southern Body for Liberation and Independence, a body within the movement.

Hadi's arrival in Aden ushered in yet another turning point in Yemen's volatile politics and had an immediate impact on events in the south. Civil disobedience campaigns and weekly protests, a mainstay of the southern movement since it was founded in 2007, were put on hold after March 10 due to

growing instability. At the same time, tensions boiled over into violent confrontations between popular committee members and Special Security Forces (SSF) when the commander in Aden, Abdulhafez Al-Saqqaf, refused Hadi's orders to step down.

In a speech aired on Aden Live TV on March 21, Hadi stressed his commitment to national unity and denied his presence in Aden signaled a move towards secession. Aden was to be a "temporary" capital, he said.

Nonetheless, he identified the southern issue as an essential component of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) and said it is "key to all of Yemen's problems." While Hadi's objectives remain at odds with the aspirations of many southerners and Southern Movement leaders, he continues to receive their support as the country's legitimate president.

Khalid Bamadhaf, a Southern Movement leader in Aden, said his movement is a peaceful one and he is therefore willing to treat Hadi as the legitimate president in spite of his lack of support for southern secession. "President Hadi does not have a program to regain the southern state. He is still talking about unity and his keenness to maintain it," he said, but says supporting Hadi is an important means to undermining the Houthis and working towards southern independence.

Abdullah Rashid, a founding member of the Southern Movement, says Hadi should be supported by southerners because he is a fellow southerner and remains the legitimate president of unified



While Hadi is now receiving considerable support in the south, he has long been considered a traitor for his role in the 1994 war. At a Southern Movement rally in Aden in 2013 a man holds a sign reading: "No dialogue with killers," referring to Hadi as head of the NDC.

Yemen.

"At this particular time, the Southern Movement recognizes the importance of supporting Hadi. Questioning his legitimacy is counter-productive because it will only lead to violence in both south and north," said Rashid.

Popular committee members came to Hadi's support in his stand-off with Al-Saqqaf, says Bamuaalem, because he is the only legitimate ruler and as such government or military officials have no right to rebel against his authority.

"The international community endorses Hadi's constitutional legitimacy, and Al-Saqqaf was supposed to commit to the presidential orders, not to receive directions from the Houthi militia," said Bamuaalem.

Radfan Al-Dubais, spokesperson for protesters in Aden's Al-Arood Square, claims many in his movement had earlier called on Hadi

to return south when he resigned in January and was placed under house arrest.

"The southern people will not let Hadi down, and will not allow the Houthi group to take over the south at any cost. If the Houthis step on Hadi's legitimacy, they step on both the south and north. What has happened in the north and what has happened to President Hadi has only strengthened the unity of the southern people," said Al-Dubais.

In spite of widespread opposition from many Yemenis across the country, including those opposed to Houthi rule, Hadi has found considerable support for foreign intervention in the south.

Nasser Al-Khubaji, a Southern Movement leader in Lahj, said he is supportive of Hadi's call. "The purpose of the call for military assistance is to defend the south. We need military aid and we support it. We know Hadi wants to defend his

legitimacy, and we also want to defend our land," he said.

Al-Dubais agrees with Al-Khubaji, but feels the need for military intervention goes beyond the southern issue. Regardless of his group's motivations and their primary objective of protecting the south from Houthi occupation, he says military intervention is necessary for the "security and safety of the entire region."

Whatever personal ties may exist between Hadi and his fellow southerners, there is no doubting the practical wisdom of working together during this critical phase in Yemen's political transition, something not lost on either side. "Hadi is not infallible, and his mistakes should not hinder our cooperation with him. The southern people do not want to retaliate against individuals, we simply want to restore our sovereign state," said Al-Dubais.

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ANALYSIS

# Riyadh's war on Yemen stokes Saudi nationalism

Madawi Al-Rasheed  
al-monitor.com  
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The Saudi war on the Shia Houthis in Yemen and deposed President Ali Abdullah Saleh united both a competitive royal family, plagued by hidden rivalries, and a divided nation. On March 26, Saudi launched airstrikes on Yemen after obtaining the support of all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with the exception of Oman, to back military action. Hours after the strikes, the Saudis announced that other Arab countries, including Egypt and Morocco, and Pakistan would join the military effort to halt the Houthi expansion toward Aden and return elected Yemeni President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi to his seat in Sana'a, now under the control of the Houthis. Washington gave its blessing and the Saudis announced that a joint operations room was set up to oversee airstrikes. Saudi Arabia is pursuing an aggressive military interventionist policy in the Arabian Peninsula. Its first attempt was in 2011, when about 1,000 troops moved into Bahrain under the umbrella of the GCC Desert Shield to support the Al-Khalifa rulers against a peaceful uprising, inspired by the wave of protests in the Arab world.

In 2009, Saudi jets participated in Saleh's war against the Houthis, one of the six wars the deposed president started against his rivals in the north of the country. The Houthis retaliated and crossed Saudi borders, where they held a small village for several days. They later retreated to the safety of their mountain villages around Sa'ada. At the time, the episode was celebrated as a victory for Saleh and his backers, Saudi King Abdullah and his minister of defense, Prince Khalid Bin Sultan.

There is more to the Saudi military intervention than halting Iranian expansion at its southern border, blocking Shia Houthi empowerment or obtaining revenge against Saleh, who had been guaranteed immunity under the GCC Initiative but turned against his patrons in Riyadh and

allied himself with their archenemy in his own country to regain power in Sana'a.

King Salman Bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud Salman is in charge, and his defense minister and head of the royal court, his young son Muhammad, is determined to establish Saudi Arabia as the policing agency of the Arabian Peninsula. His son, an inexperienced graduate of the local King Saud University in Riyadh, is overseeing the operations. His mother is from the strong Ajman tribe. He's a true local, untarnished by outside corrupting influences, and is presented as the new bridge with traditional constituencies in Saudi Arabia. His youth must have endeared him to his father, as the elderly tend to have a certain affinity toward their youngest child. Perhaps such fathers see in these latecomers a reminder of their virility and potency, which have gradually eroded with old age. This is not to mention the development of a special trust and affinity toward a young man, who may not be seen as being in competition with the father. Such sentiments may not be easily maintained with an eldest hawkish son with ambitions of his own. Muhammad's credentials are yet to be established in an external war that is still ambiguous, dangerous and perhaps catastrophic for both Yemen and Riyadh. Muhammad is determined to achieve military success to stand on equal footing with his uncle, Prince Muhammad Bin Naif, who established his credentials as the security man of Riyadh by fighting local terrorism and expelling terrorists to Yemen, where Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula had established its headquarters. Salman promoted his young son at the expense of more experienced individuals. For example, Oxford graduate Faisal was sent to Medina to serve as governor, while other sons were placed in charge of tourism, oil and other less spectacular government bureaus.

Like his cousin Khalid Bin Sultan, who earned the title "Desert Warrior" for his participation in the 1991 Gulf War to liberate Kuwait, Muhammad needs to earn a military title, perhaps "Destroyer of Shia Rejectionists and their Persian Backers in Yemen," to remain relevant among

more experienced and aspiring siblings and disgruntled royal cousins. Notable among this group are his older, more credentialed half-brothers. Faisal could have been appointed foreign minister, given his education in international relations and his knowledge of Saudi-Iranian relations. Yet Salman is still holding on to Saud Al-Faisal, who has been foreign minister since 1975.

Perhaps Muhammad Bin Salman is expected to deliver the heads of several Houthis, notably the sons of the scholar Badr Al-Deen Al-Houthi, who are now in charge of the rebellion. It was reported that a young Houthi son named Abdullah had already been killed during the first hours of the Saudi airstrikes. The Houthi sons are not new to assassinations, as several of their ancestors have been targeted in the past. Yet the rebellion continued, and this armed Shia-Zaydi clan did not give up its quest for power-sharing and equitable distribution of economic sources from the central Yemeni government. Their northern province remains one of the most destitute regions in a poor country. Previous Saudi airstrikes further contributed to the impoverishment of the region, and they are bound to aggravate the situation now.

Besides settling the rivalry between various royal figures with a military victory over the Houthis, the Saudi military intervention promises to unite a divided and apprehensive nation. Saudis are ideologically divided on domestic affairs and their government's counter-revolutionary tactics in the past five years. So-called liberal Saudis want the government to control conservative religious constituencies and grant them more personal freedoms, from lifting the ban on women's driving to abolishing the religious police. At the other end of the spectrum, the majority of Islamists want more Islamization, under the quest to remain faithful to the Saudi-Wahabi pact of the 18th century, in which the Al-Saud clan swore to keep the flames of Islam ignited inside Saudi Arabia and beyond its borders. The Islamists, who have demanded more civil and political rights, an elected government in a constitutional monarchy and accountability, have been

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put behind bars. There is no sign that they will be released under the Saudi monarch. Such internal divisions have persisted and even became more obvious with the mass protests sweeping the Arab world. They all, however, aspired toward defeating Iran and thwarting its expansion toward Arab lands. They were all disappointed with the unsuccessful efforts of the Saudi regime to depose Bashar Al-Assad of Syria. The Saudi regime's failure to score a victory over Iran, coupled with the US-Iranian rapprochement over Iran's nuclear program, is interpreted as a serious Saudi defeat. Hence, the war on Yemen promises to nourish an aggressive and unifying hyper-nationalism, at least in the short term. Within minutes of the Saudi airstrikes, Saudis began their usual hashtag activism under the moniker Asif Al-Hazm (Operation Decisive Storm). Social media users expressed their support of the new young defense minister by posting photos of him conducting war efforts like a NATO general from the high-tech military operations room. This was a celebration of the new king and his son, both of whom are required to persist in their unwavering efforts to thwart the Shia and Iranian expansion on the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula.

The war is seen as a revival of the Muslim duty—in particular, the Saudi duty—to purify religion from the "Majus" (a pejorative term for Persians), the Safavids and the heretic Shias. Less racist and religiously bigoted opinions invoked Arab nationalism to defend the Arab identity of Yemen. There is no room for dissenting opinions, as opponents of the war, or even those who question the war's logic, are labeled traitors against the nation and religion. Suddenly, Saudis were able to unite over a controversial intervention in a domestic Yemeni con-

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flict. Saudis seemed desperate for a war with Iran, albeit through a Houthi proxy. As long as this war remains confined to Yemen's rugged mountains and destitute cities, and so long as it does not spill over to southern Saudi Arabia, Saudis are happy to witness the destruction on their screens and Twitter accounts. The war on Yemen may well be what Saudis—both commoners and royalty—have wanted for a long time. A victory over the Houthis is important for domestic reasons, not least to mend internal Saudi divides, but also to save the Saudi leadership from embarrassment over its complete failure to score victory over Iran in Syria and Iraq, and over Washington's new policy to mend its ties with Iran and possibly lift sanctions. The orchestra is beating the drums of war but whether this war is in the interest of the warring Yemeni factions or is going to deliver peace in Yemen remains to be seen.

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