

The Malay Elite: From the Hadhrami Diaspora to the War in Yemen

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Abstract

When Yemen is mentioned, images of a long-term civil war between the government, the Houthis, and a complex combination of international actors immediately come to mind. But what is less known about Yemen is its diaspora community in Southeast Asia that migrated there, especially from the Hadhramaut region in the south of Yemen. In the 17th century, many Hadhramis left their homeland for different regions around the Indian Ocean, and most of them settled in Southeast Asia. In fact, today many Arab families in the region are descendants of the first wave of Hadhrami businessmen and academics who migrated to this region in search of a better life. Therefore, the purpose of writing this article is to examine the position of Yemen and Yemenis from the point of view of the Malay elites, and to answer the question of what position the Yemenis have from the point of view of the Malay elites, and what changes this view has seen since the 17th century? In order to answer this question, the author tries to examine this position from the time of the migration of Hadhramis to Southeast Asia, especially the Malay world (Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia) until the Yemen crisis (since 2015) and in two The level of political elites and civil society elites and using the comparative research method to describe this position.

Keywords: Yemen, Southeast Asia, Hadhramaut, Malay world, Hadhrami

Introduction

Sadat Alatas are Alavi, Hosseini, Hashemi, and Adnani tribes from Sadat al-Ba Alavi tribes in Hadhramaut, Yemen. They are from the generation of Seyyed Abd al-Rahman bin

Aqeel, from whose generation many prominent scholars and famous figures have emerged, and they have spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula, the United Arab Emirates, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Therefore, the roots of the Yemenis of the Malay world go back to Hadhramaut in Yemen. Haridah is known as the Alatas dynasty's capital; some later moved to nearby valleys and villages.

But when Yemen is mentioned, images of the long-term civil war between the government, the Houthis, and a complex combination of international actors immediately come to mind. What has been less noticed about Yemen is its diaspora community in Southeast Asia; The diaspora community who have migrated to Southeast Asia, especially from the Hadhramaut region in the south of Yemen. Many Hadhramis left their homeland in the 17th century to migrate to different areas around the Indian Ocean, and most of them settled in Southeast Asia. In fact, today many Arab families in the region are descendants of the first wave of Hadhrami businessmen and academics who migrated to this region in search of a better life.

Upon their arrival in the region, these immigrants established a close relationship with the ruling families and prominent political families of the region. Also, migrant merchants used their connections in Southeast Asia and Hadhramaut to advance their business interests. Some of the fields in which they worked and were active were retail, spices, pickles, textiles, transportation, and real estate. Importantly, many of these companies achieved considerable commercial success, so that by 1885, about 25% of real estate in Singapore, such as the Raffles Hotel, was owned by Hadhrami individuals or families. In the 1940s, the Hadhrami families were the richest families in Singapore. But the important point was that most of the Hadhrami families returned their wealth to their homeland in Yemen, and in the 19th century, the economy of Hadhramaut was highly dependent on remittances sent from Southeast Asia and India. This shows how influential and successful the diaspora community was and even some of these successful families used their wealth to advance political projects in Hadhramaut.

In this context, we can mention the actions of Abu Bakr al-Kaaf. Abu Bakr bin Sheikh al-Kaaf (1305-1385 AH) was a leader and social reformer in Yemen's Hadhramaut who had great political and social influence in the southern region of Arab countries. He had a prominent role in establishing peace and extinguishing the fire of tribal wars in Hadhramaut, constantly seeking to end the rebellions and differences between the tribes. In addition, he spent a lot of money to serve the country and Hadhrami community in various national fields. He was born in the month of Safar 1305 AH / 1887 AD in Singapore and his father Sheikh bin Abdul Rahman Al-Kaaf was the owner of huge wealth in Singapore and Indonesia. His father stayed with him in Singapore for five years, then returned to Hadhramaut in 1310 AH / 1892 AD. He grew up under the care of his parents in the city of Tarem and grew up in an environment rich with many scientists and good people and teachers. In 1938, the British government awarded him the title the highest rank of the Commander of the British Empire in recognition of his efforts to establish peace and security in Hadhramaut and public services such as participation in the creation of many major projects for the country.

In addition to operating in the Hadhramaut region, many of these wealthy immigrant families used their wealth in charity projects in the Southeast Asian region and funded many schools, hospitals, and mosques. In this way, they helped the development of their host countries. For example, the first mosque in Singapore was financed by the Al-Junaid family. Although in the 20th century the wealth and fame of Hadhrami immigrants gradually decreased, many of their heritages can still be observed. Their contributions are remembered with the names of important streets and buildings such as Al-Junaid Road, Al-Junaid Residential Town, and Al-Kaaf Street in Singapore (The contributions of Yemen's diasporic community in Southeast Asia, 2018).

In the nineteenth century, Singapore became a staging post for pilgrims wishing to make the *Hajj*. Their transportation was undertaken by Hadhrami-owned shipping companies such as those established by the al-Saqqaf (Alsagoff), al-Kaaf, and al-Jifri families (Alatas, 2010). Even in the last decade, a large number of Muslims in the Southeast

Asian region, especially in Indonesia, considered a plan for a pilgrimage to Yemen's Hadhramaut Valley during the Hajj.

The unification of North and South Yemen in 1990 resulted in a relatively free political atmosphere in which different Islamic groups sought to secure an ideological niche for themselves amidst intense public contestations over the country's future and religio-political identity. Despite the unification, people in most parts of the former South Yemen remained resentful of northerners. The political leaders of South Yemen continued to accuse the north-dominated government of pursuing a systematic economic marginalization of the south. Such grievances led to the civil war in 1994 between the northern and the southern armies, which ended with the victory of the north and the exile of the leading members of the South Yemeni—mostly Hadhrami—leadership. Since then, the Yemeni state has remained suspicious of what it perceived as the secessionist tendency of Hadhramaut, especially due to the fact that the region had historically established strong transnational links to the Indian Ocean world. (Alatas, 2014)

Prior to the unification, the government of North Yemen was actively supporting Salafi groups in their attempt to destabilize the socialist South. Ideologically and financially indebted to Saudi Arabia, many of these groups presented themselves as the bearer of pristine Islam and launched virulent diatribes against 'traditionalist' scholars with Sufi orientations, including the Ba Alawi of Hadhramaut. Following the unification, the Yemeni government began supporting Sufi religious establishments in order to balance out the Salafis. The government spent money rebuilding Sufi shrines and institutions in South Yemen that had been suppressed under the socialist regime. This led to the re-flowering of Sufism in the wadi (valley) Hadhramaut. Within this context, a young Ba Alawi scholar, Habib Umar bin Hafidh (b. 1962) emerged as a fiery orator, defending the Ba Alawi as the bearer of authentic Islam, while reviving Sufism and Sufi shrines in Hadramaut (Alatas, 2014).

In 1993, Habib Umar visited Indonesia to rekindle diasporic and intellectual connections between Ba Alawi followers living in Indonesia and their ancestral homeland.

After spending a month in Indonesia he returned to Hadhramaut with 40 young Indonesians (of both Hadhrami and non-Hadhrami descent) who were to be educated under his personal care. The 40 Indonesian students became the embryo of Habib Umar's Dar al-Mustafa Academy, founded in 1996. Gradually, students from Yemen and other Arab countries, followed by Muslim converts from Western countries, began to flock to Dar al-Mustafa. More and more Indonesians studied at the academy, and in 1999 Habib Umar's wife opened an adjoining school for women named Dar al-Zahra. After spending three to four years in Hadhramaut, the Indonesian students would return to their homeland with a renewed proselytizing zeal. They began establishing *majelis taklim* (Islamic study groups), transmitting what they had learned to the wider public and paving the way for the revival of the Ba Alawi tradition in Indonesia. These students became the primary agents in reintroducing Hadhramaut as a spiritually significant place for Indonesian Muslims (Alatas, 2014). Also, Ali Al-Attas (1932-2008) was from the Al-Attas Hadhrami family and was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs during Suharto's time, his name was raised as a politician in the international arena, and he was one of the senior diplomatic officials of this country (Alatas, 2010).

But apart from this historical and diasporic record, what will be presented in this article is the position of Malay political elites towards the war in Yemen, which started in 2015 and has gained a transnational aspect. The author tried to present the position of the political elites of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei, but due to the lack of specific and reliable sources about the position of the political elites of Brunei and Singapore, only the position of the political elites of Malaysia and Indonesia will be presented.

Literature Review

No book or scientific article has been published in Persian or English about the position of the Malay elites regarding the war in Yemen. However, there are sources in English about the Yemeni diaspora in Southeast Asia. Regarding the war in Yemen, articles have been published in Persian, the most important of which will be introduced below.

Sources related to the Yemeni diaspora in the Southeast Asian region

A book titled *The Hadhrami Diaspora in Southeast Asia* was published in 2009 by Hassan Ibrahim and Abu Shouk in English by Brill. This volume originates from the proceedings of an international conference convened by the Department of History and Civilization, International Islamic University Malaysia, in collaboration with the Embassy of the Republic of Yemen, in Kuala Lumpur, from 26 to 28 August 2005. Twelve out of thirty-five papers presented at the conference were reviewed, thoroughly revised, and published in this volume. The introduction and the twelve chapters address the question of Hadhrami identity in Southeast Asia from various perspectives and investigate the patterns of Hadhrami interaction with diverse cultures, values, and beliefs in the region. Special attention is paid to Hadhrami local and transnational politics, social stratification and integration, religio-social reform, and journalism, as well as to economic dynamism and the cosmopolitan character of the Hadhrami societies in Southeast Asia (Ibrahim and Shouk, 2009).

Imam Sabchi (2019), in an article titled ‘History of Hadhrami Community in Southeast Asia’, emphasizes that Hadhrami-Arabs have played essential roles in the Islamisation process across the Southeast Asian region. This article diachronically examines the history of Hadhrami community and their roles in Islamisation. It looks at the dynamics, adaptation, and contestation of Islamisation in the region. This article offers actor-centered accounts of how the Hadhrami community contributes to Islamic proselytization activism (*dakwah*), politics, and contestation within the community. It further argues that, throughout the history of Hadhrami in Southeast Asia, political adaptation and contestation have been essential elements that shape the current Islamic-scape in contemporary Southeast Asia (Subchi, 2019).

Leif Manger (2010), in the book titled *The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-Building on the Indian Ocean Rim*, presents the history of Hadhrami migration to the Indian Ocean region. This book aims to contribute to an understanding of the fascinating migration history of the Hadhramis of South Yemen and the resulting emergence of

Hadhrami diasporic communities throughout the Indian Ocean region. Migration from Hadhramaut was always a result of many different factors. It was initiated by drought and tribal wars at home in Hadhramaut but was also the result of people pursuing trading opportunities in the Indian Ocean region. Some Hadhramis traveled as Islamic missionaries. The migration has brought the Hadhramis to South East Asia, parts of India, the Comoro Islands in the Indian Ocean, the Swahili and Somali (Manger, 2010).

Sources related to the war in Yemen and its national and regional consequences

Hatami and Beigi (2019) in the article ‘Perspective of the War in Yemen and its security consequences for the Islamic Republic of Iran’, which was published in the Quarterly Journal of International Relations Research in Iran, put forward four scenarios of ‘continuation of the war’, ‘Dialogue’, ‘Division of Yemen into North Yemen and South Yemen’ and ‘Referendum’, and argue that these scenarios will be the most likely scenarios for the future of the war in Yemen, respectively (Hatami and Beigi 2019).

Hosseinizadeh, Farhadi and Ghafarizadeh (2015), in an article entitled ‘Yemen War and Al-Qaeda in the Peninsula’ published in the Political Science Quarterly in Iran, while pointing out the importance of Yemen's geopolitical position, put forward this argument that the Arab coalition's attack on Yemen led by Saudi Arabia and the tacit support of the big extra-regional powers have led to political and security consequences in Yemen. According to the authors, along with the emergence of the Shia Houthis as an effective military-political power with broad popular support, especially in the north of this country, Al-Qaeda in the Peninsula as one of the actors in the political arena of Yemen (Hosseinizadeh, Farhadi and Ghaffari, 2015).

The position of the political elites of Malaysia towards the war in Yemen

The position of the Malaysian political elite from the beginning of the war until now is examined in three time periods. In the first period, Malaysia joined the coalition forces of Saudi Arabia against the Houthis. In the second term, which was the term of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, Malaysia announced that it would withdraw from the coalition force and withdrew from the coalition forces, and in the third phase, it agreed to the proposal of a permanent ceasefire between the conflicting forces under the supervision of the United Nations and has announced that will provide the necessary support.

First period: Companionship with Saudi Arabia in the war in Yemen

In the first stage, which is referred to as accompanying Saudi Arabia in the war in Yemen, Malaysian Air Force planes entered a military air base in Saudi Arabia to participate in the Riyadh-led 'Renewal of Hope' military operation against the Houthis in Yemen. By joining Malaysia, this country officially participated in the Saudi air attack on Houthi positions in Yemen.

At this point, the Saudi government was trying to increase its political, cultural, and religious influence in Southeast Asia, especially Malaysia. In fact, the expansion of former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Najib Razak's relations with Saudi Arabia led to widespread embezzlement and corruption in the Malaysian government during his primeministership, and his corruption case was also pursued in court (Waqari, 2017).

Second period: Separation from the Saudi coalition

With the victory of 'PH' led by Mahathir Muhammad in the parliamentary elections of Malaysia in 2017, the direction of the country's foreign policy also changed drastically. The result of this election was not only a very heavy defeat for the UMNO coalition and the Barisan Nasional party led by Tun Najib Razak, but it was also considered a heavy defeat for Saudi Arabia because by developing relations with the Razak government, it sought to make Malaysia the main ally of Saudi Arabia in the region.

Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad had a different personality from Tun Najib Razak, and he put support for liberation movements, including Palestine, and fighting terrorists on the agenda. His victory in the 2017 Malaysian elections had many consequences, one of which was the withdrawal of Malaysia from the Saudi coalition in aggression against Yemen. With this decision, Mahathir Mohammad's government showed that it considers the national interests and the interests of the Islamic world. Seyyed Farid Al-Attas, a Malaysian sociologist (from the Al-Attas Hadhrami family) and a professor at the National University of Singapore, also stated in a press interview that this decision of the Malaysian government is admirable and that Malaysia should not involve itself in the interests of Saudi Arabia in the region. This decision of Mahathir Muhammad to withdraw the country's military forces from Yemen was welcomed by the people and elites of the Malaysian civil society. Political circles and civil institutions in Malaysia, such as the 'Lawyers for Freedom' group and the Malaysian writer and thinker Faisal Musa, after this decision of the Malaysian government, announced the basic policy of this country to avoid any military intervention in the affairs of countries and maintain neutrality. Many political and media elites in Malaysia believe that the gifts that the Saudi rulers gave to the former Prime Minister of Malaysia are estimated to be over 700 million dollars and that his reward was for accompanying Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war (Waqari, 2017).

Third period: agreeing to the proposal of a permanent ceasefire in Yemen

At this point in time, Malaysia welcomed the Saudi initiative to end the war in Yemen and announced that it is ready to help the Saudi initiative. Saudi Arabia presented a new peace initiative in 2021 to bring peace to Yemen, provide aid to its people, and end the country's six-year war. This plan called for a comprehensive ceasefire under the supervision of the United Nations, the reopening of Sana'a airport, and the import of fuel and food through Hodeida port, both of which were under the control of Houthi militias. This initiative was immediately supported by the Yemeni government and welcomed by the United Nations, the United States, the European Union, the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council countries, and most Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan and Malaysia. Malaysia

appreciated the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for its recent initiative to end the conflict and resume the political process in Yemen (Malaysia Backs Saudi Bid to End Yemen War, 2021).

Malaysia welcomed the recent establishment of the Presidential Leadership Council in the Republic of Yemen initiated by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a positive step towards finding a comprehensive political and peaceful solution to the conflict in Yemen. Therefore, at this point, Malaysia fully supported the initiatives of the United Nations (UN) Secretary General Special Envoy for Yemen including the ceasefire agreement between the Government of Yemen and the Houthis. This bodes well for the cessation of hostilities and unimpeded access to humanitarian relief for the people of Yemen.

Malaysia reiterated its support for an inclusive and peaceful solution to the conflict in Yemen through dialogue and negotiations. Malaysia was concerned over the prolonged conflict and urged the concerned parties to respect international human rights and international humanitarian laws (Malaysia welcomes recent developments in the Republic of Yemen, 2022).

In a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Tuesday (Oct 11), it said Malaysia strongly believes the immediate resumption of negotiation between the concerned parties is crucial to reaching an inclusive and negotiated political settlement in Yemen.

‘Malaysia continues to closely follow developments in Yemen and joins the international community in expressing concerns over the missed opportunity to renew the UN-brokered ceasefire, following its expiry on Oct 2. The strong political will by leaders of all parties will lead to an amicable solution to the conflict and pave the way for normalcy in Yemen. Malaysia is pleased to note that the UN-brokered ceasefire deal since April 2 has resulted in improved humanitarian conditions and reduced civilian casualties in the country,’ it

said. (Malaysia calls on all parties to work towards resolving conflict, and recovery of Yemen, 2022)

The position of Indonesia's political elites towards the war in Yemen

Due to the fact that Joko Widodo has been the seventh president of Indonesia since October 20, 2014, a consistent and unwavering policy has been adopted regarding the war in Yemen, which will be discussed further.

In September 2015, Joko Widodo made his first Middle East trip to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, and in the city of Jeddah, he was confronted with the Saudi Aramco oil company's 10-billion-dollar investment proposal in Indonesia. He planned this trip according to Indonesia's economic conditions and shortage of energy and also took into account the attraction of capital, the sale of weapons, and social cooperation. But Aramco's 10-billion-dollar investment proposal was the most important part of this trip and showed Saudi Arabia's effort to attract the opinion of Indonesia as the most populous Muslim country that can be influential in regional political equations and the Islamic world. Indonesia has a neutral position regarding Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Yemen, and before the Saudi-led coalition attacked Yemen, Riyadh invited Indonesia to participate in this attack, but Jakarta did not accept it (Saudi Arabia's attempt to attract Indonesia's opinion/ 10 billion dollar offer, 2014).

In March 2015, Indonesia hosted the 60th Asia-Africa Summit, and in addition to Jokowi's clear and transparent position, his deputy Yusuf Kala also called on the conflicting groups to end the violence and choose negotiation and peaceful solutions to resolve conflicts and return peace to Yemen. Considering the historical and influential role of Indonesia in the issues of the Islamic world countries, Indonesia announced that Jakarta was very concerned about the situation in Yemen and hoped that the tensions in Yemen would be resolved through dialogue and peace, and even indicated that the Indonesian government has submitted a proposal to the ambassadors of the member countries of the

Organization of Islamic Cooperation to create a special force to resolve the conflict in Yemen (Indonesia: Negotiating the solution to the crisis in Yemen / Creating a special task force to end the conflict, 2014).

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi and her Saudi counterpart, Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, discussed security issues, including the recent developments in Yemen, over the phone on Tuesday (September 15, 2020). The situation in Yemen was also discussed at a meeting of the UN Security Council the same day. Special Envoy of the UN, Secretary General Martin Griffith, and UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Mark Lowcock, also gave briefings at the meeting on the latest situation in Yemen. ‘Basically, the briefing highlighted the anxious situation in Yemen where local people are suffering due to the protracted conflict. The briefing also touched on the danger of starvation, (which is) endangering most Yemeni people,’ she said.

Both at the meeting of the UN Security Council and during the phone conversation with the Saudi foreign minister, Retno said Indonesia urged all sides to exercise self-restraint and soon agree on a joint declaration initiated by the special envoy of the UN Secretary General. Indonesia denounced the attack launched by Houthi on neighboring countries, including Saudi Arabia, and was worried about the humanitarian situation in the field, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, she underscored the importance of protecting civilians. ‘Indonesia also called for the reopening of the Sanaa Airport since it serves as a gateway for humanitarian aid to Yemen,’ she added.

Conclusion

The findings show that the position of the political elites of Malaysia and Indonesia towards the war in Yemen has certain differences. The position of the political elites of Malaysia has not experienced a uniform process due to the internal political developments of this country on the one hand and the type of foreign policy orientation on the other hand, and from aligning with Saudi Arabia and participating in the war coalition in Yemen led by Saudi Arabia to withdrawing from the coalition and agreeing to a permanent ceasefire has

fluctuated. However, the position of the Indonesian political elite has been unified due to the lack of change in the government and as a result of the lack of change in the direction of foreign policy, and efforts such as asking the conflicting groups to end the violence and to negotiate and find a solution for resolve disputes and return peace to Yemen. The important point is that, unlike Malaysia, Indonesia did not directly participate in the Yemen war, and even despite the proposals made by Saudi Arabia to accompany Indonesia in the Yemen war, Joko Widodo did not accept them.

Table one. Comparing the views of the elites of the Malay world on the war in Yemen

Country	orientation	examples	Individuals/Entities
Political elite/Malaysia	fluctuate	From cooperation in the Saudi coalition against Yemen to withdrawing from the coalition and agreeing to a permanent ceasefire	Najib Razak/ Mahathir Mohammad Ministry of Foreign Affairs/
Political elites/Indonesia	Uniform	Not accompanying Saudi Arabia in the coalition against	Joko widodo, Yusuf Kala Retno Marsudi

		Yemen/ not entering the war	
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