

Flashpoint Yemen—Between Sectarianism and Self Determination

By *Antonino Occhiuto*
Researcher
Euro-Gulf Information Centre

Although Yemen knows more years of war than peace, it has fallen into a state of political trauma with the rise of the Houthis—a Shia tribal group whose military ranks swelled from some 3,000 (est) in 2006 to nearly 100,000 (est) by 2013. Financially backed and militarily trained by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Houthi captured Yemen’s capital Sana’a in 2014, plunging the country into deep crisis and entangling it in a complex system of civil-local-national-international conflict that involves the great and superpowers and a motley crew of militias and terrorist organisations. The Houthis receive reinforcements and assistance from forces loyal to (former President) Ali Abdullah Saleh who was ousted by a popular uprising in 2011.

But there is stiff resistance to Houthi actions. The national army, under the command of Abd Al Mansour Hadi, leader of the internationally recognised government, has already stopped, and began to push back, the Houthi onslaught. These forces are supported by a wide Arab coalition that sews Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Bahrain and Kuwait into a united forces framework.

This larger conflict — of the Arab coalition balancing against an aggrandising Iran — overlaps with a myriad of internal dynamics, historical grievances and struggles. Among the most potent of these is characterised by the evolution of tensions produced by the unification of the northern and southern provinces in the 1990 creation of the Republic of Yemen under the *Sana’a Accord*. Ali Abdullah Saleh, the most prominent political figure in Northern Yemen during the Cold War, became the first, and so far only, president of a unified Yemen. The opposition between the southern tribes and the Saleh government caused the 1994 civil war which itself prevented the re-establishment of independence of South Yemen. This carries its own set of problems since a proper reconciliation process never took shape and the tribes in southern Yemen have, since unification, been exploited — if not repressed — by the political establishment in Sana’a.

The revival of a separatist movement in the overwhelmingly Sunni South Yemen should come as no surprise following the Houthi rebels' seizure of Sana'a and huge swathes of territory throughout the country—and the invitation by the Houthi to receive Iranian advisors on-the-ground. And, of course, the intrinsic political schism between northern/central tribes (loyal to the Saleh administration) and the southern tribes, were never resolved. The integration of the pre-1990 Socialist Republic of South Yemen with the Saleh-led Arab Republic (North Yemen), never successfully materialised. The current opportunistic alliance between Shiite Houthi militias and former president Saleh, is based on their shared interest to prevent the breakaway of Yemen's southern provinces loyal to Abd Rabbih Mansur Hadi.

In the Aden region, southern secessionism has been reinforced by the unfolding conflict. Spokesmen of different militias, all part of the Southern Resistance Movement — the armed wing of *all* secessionist movements — have frequently laid out new independence proposals. The same applies to the south-eastern region of Hadhramaut, as evidenced by the July 2016 Memorandum issued by the Hadhramaut regional governor, Major General Ahmad Bin Bourek. Such a memorandum, issued for all customs, ministerial and government institutions, banned Sana'a central bank as the recipient of Yemen's state resources in favour of Mukalla's National Commercial Bank in Hadhramaut.

Despite such grievances, on which secessionism is based, the secession of South Yemen is unlikely to take place due to the absence of a strong leader and to the lack of support the separatist cause enjoys among foreign powers. Saudi Arabia, strongly opposing southern Yemen secession, intimated to Ali Salem al-Beidh, (the last president of South Yemen and leader of the Southern Resistance movement), to halt his secessionist agenda. While sympathising with the idea of secession, the UAE is also favourable to the Saudi position. Divergence on the future political structure of Yemen, is a key obstacle that prevents a compromise that is acceptable between the warring parties.

If serious peacemaking steps are not undertaken then the next years are likely to be characterised by war and chaos fomented by sectarianism. But, in the open vacuum that is Yemen's political space, an independent South Yemen may represent a collective good since it would sue for peace in order to consolidate. Separation between North and South would render sectarianism and tribal tensions moot since the reason for conflict, re: territorial and wealth distribution, would fall within the new, respected, state boundaries. An independent and effective state in South Yemen would also prevent Yemen from becoming a failed state. Yemen's central government has historically struggled to control the Hadhramaut region, strongly infiltrated and partly controlled by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and subject to a massive US drone campaign. A government based in Southern Yemen is more likely to win the allegiance of all local southern tribes and to prevent AQAP from gaining popular support.



Of course, the independence of South Yemen could also produce negative consequences for the security of Saudi Arabia and generate an important geopolitical dilemma regarding the current regional struggle in which Riyadh and Tehran are opposed. The dominance of northern Yemen by the formidable, Iran-backed, Houthi militia would be certain following the partition of Yemen into North and South. A Shia-militia-controlled North Yemen, bordering Saudi Arabia, would be used by Iran to destabilise its main rival in the same fashion as the Ayatollah's regime already does with Hezbollah in other parts of the region. An increasing threat to Saudi Arabia's southern border, already evidenced by missile launches and incursions carried out by the Houthis (and mainly targeting the city of Najrān), would inevitably provoke escalations and plunge the region further into chaos.

While there is no crystal ball to tell the future of Yemen, if its past is anything to go by then it is of the utmost urgency to take preventive measure and end the cycle of violence before it spirals out of control. To make peace, innovation is needed. Perhaps allowing the peoples of South Yemen to determine their collective future while ending Iranian actions to wage war against Saudi Arabia from others' territory is the only viable solution to decades of conflict.