



Southern Secessionists Divided By Regional Identities

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Southern Secessionists Divided By Regional Identities

The military expansion of the Houthis and forces loyal to Ali Abdallah Saleh into Southern Yemen in February 2015, after the flight of president Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi to Aden, exacerbated the north-south division of the country, highlighting its fragmentation. This led to a strong military response in the South to what appeared to be a new invasion by Northern forces after the 1994 war: from that moment on, new military and political orientations have risen in the South, as well as increased popular support for separatism.

The People's Republic of Southern Yemen was declared on 30 November 1967, later becoming the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen from 1970 to 1990: its historical legacy has been crucial in legitimizing demands for the independence of the South. Moreover, this experience presents memories of internal conflicts in the country's former Socialist regime, which did not wholly succeed in suppressing regional divisions inherited from the British colonial period.

The January 1986 war between Yemen Socialist Party's various factions revealed regional or even tribal rivalries playing out against the background of power struggles among the Party's leaders. The country's then president, Ali Nasser Mohammed, originally from Abyan as the current president Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, relied on forces mainly recruited from Abyan, Aden, Shabwa and Mahra regions. He was forced to flee to the North when these militants were defeated by a coalition composed mostly of fighters from the Lahej, Dale', Yafe'¹ and Hadramawt regions. The power struggles between the leading figures of the Party's Political Bureau largely reflected their regional affiliations, and these regional divisions are still important today.

The foundation of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Aden on 11 May 2017 was followed by massive support demonstrations in Southern provinces. The STC, led by Aydarous Al-Zubaidi, the former governor of Aden fired by president Hadi, coalesced various Southern factions that claimed for the secession of the South, including the leaders of two groups that had taken part in the resistance to the Houthi and Saleh's forces. The first faction, the 'Security Belt' forces, are mainly made up of fighters from the Yafe' region commanded

¹ Yafe' tribal confederation is located in Yemen's tribal south, from the North east Aden region to the Al-Baydha governorate, with a branch settled also in Hadhramaut.

by Salafist leader Hani Bin Burayk, vice-president of the STC. The second group includes members of the Aden security forces proceeding from the Dale' governorate, as the same Aydarous Al-Zubaidi. Both factions are supported by the United Arab Emirates. A third armed group encompasses the presidential protection forces loyal to Hadi, most of them coming from the Abyan governorate.

In February 2017, the Presidential Guard fought 'Security Belt' forces when the latter tried to prevent president Hadi's plane from landing at Aden Airport. However, the fighting that took place in the city on 28 January 2018 revealed the true balance of power in Southern provinces. On this occasion, the 'Southern Resistance Forces' gained the upper hand over government forces and encircled the presidential palace, with the fighting stopping only after the Saudi-Emirati mediation.

Instability and political violence worsened due to the terrorist attacks that have taken place in Aden, with Islamic State (IS), which does not have territorial base in Yemen, being particularly active in the Southern capital. Attacks by IS have targeted government buildings or those used by the security forces as well as senior government and military figures: for instance, the headquarters of the Yemeni anti-terrorist forces were attacked on 24 February 2018. Several unclaimed assaults, targeting Salafist sheikhs or figures in the Al-Islah Party (close to the Muslim Brotherhood), occurred since the liberation of Aden in July 2015, thus suggesting the existence of rivalries for political and religious leadership in the city.

The Southern Front does not only consist of the rebel forces that control Aden: Hadramawt and Shabwa regions also have their own armed forces under the banner of the 'Hadramawt elite' (*Al-Nukhba Al-hadramiyya*) and the 'Shabwa elite' (*Al-Nukhba Al-chabwaniyya*). These tribal forces were created by the United Arab Emirates after the liberation of Mukalla from Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (April 2016) to continue the fight against this organization in their regions. These regional security bodies compete with the government troops stationed in these provinces, constituted of soldiers from both North and South.

The United Arab Emirates followed a policy of political, military and economic influence in Southern Yemen, supporting at the same time the Saleh's clan in the North, something which increased the threat of fragmentation in the country. The UAE's airstrip in Perim island, and the Yemeni military bases seized by the Emiratis in Mokha and Dhubab ensure them the control of the military operations in the Red sea costal area. Dubai Port World regained the concession of the Aden port in 2015 and the United Arab Emirates have been eyeing now the

Socotra Archipelago in the Indian Ocean, listed by UNESCO as a World Natural Heritage Site in 2008. The Emirati military mission sent to Socotra after two devastating storms in November 2015, ostensibly to deliver humanitarian aid, turned into a parallel source of power in competition with the Yemeni government.

However, the Hadramawt is a distinct region that could be an obstacle to the separatist project promoted by the Southern Transitional Council. Some elite groups in Hadramawt have argued for region's enhanced political and economic autonomy, and this has been encouraged by its oil and gas reserves and close links to Saudi Arabia. At the end of August 2015, 95 sheikhs from the Hadramawt tribes signed a petition asking for the annexation of Hadramawt, Mahra and part of Shabwa by Saudi Arabia, stating that this region historically belonged to Saudi Arabia and that its annexation would halt Shiite expansionism. On 22 April 2017, the Hadramawt Conference issued a declaration saying that the Hadramawt was a politically autonomous region distinct from the rest of South Yemen within a federal framework.

Saudi Arabia has extended its influence in Mahra Province by sending troops to take over border posts with Oman and the Al-Gayda Airport. Riyadh intends to open a Salafist religious centre in Qachan, the Province's third-largest city, which has acted as a magnet for Salafists from the North, thus provoking local demonstrations against this human and ideological influx.

The STC is made up of various currents demanding either independence or federalism and the division of the country into two regions. But it has also had to face opposition from other organizations that aspire to represent the South, such as the Supreme Council of the Revolutionary Movement for the Liberation and Independence of the South led by Hassan Baoum. In November 2017, the latter demanded the withdrawal of Saudi and Emirati forces from Southern Yemen.

Proposals for a federal Yemen could be revived in order to meet the political and military divisions that have opened up in the conflict or even to prepare for the independence of the South of the country. This could, however, be hampered by growing regional differences among the same Southern provinces.

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