

Understanding the Role of the “Southern Question” in Yemen’s War by Thanos Petouris, Phd.

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<http://muftah.org/southern-question-yemen-war/#.V5aO2bJTHIU>

On March 26, 2015, civil war officially broke out in Yemen. On that day, Saudi Arabia marshaled a hastily convened coalition of the willing to forcibly intervene in Yemen’s internal affairs, launching an all out armed conflict between forces loyal to the ‘legitimate government’ of president ‘Abd al-Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and supporters of the alliance between ex-President ‘Ali ‘Abdullah Saleh and the Ansar Allah or Houthi movement. Yemeni public opinion quickly became polarized, as the coalition began its bombing campaign and the Saleh/Houthi alliance seized control of major urban centers in western Yemen and laid siege to the southern city of Aden.

In short order, the Arab and Western media’s discourse on the war became reduced to naïve narratives about a bipolar confrontation between the Yemeni government and local Shiite insurgents and, by implication, a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Within this framework, local conflicts and social movements were either ignored or subsumed, further obscuring the nuances of the war and the motives of local actors.

A case in point is the Southern Movement (al-Hirak al-Janubi), which purports to represent the southern provinces of Yemen that were part of the former socialist People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, 1967–1990). The PDRY merged with the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in 1990 to form the Republic of Yemen.

Al-Hirak’s involvement in the current conflict is fueled by a combination of historical grievances given new salience as a result of the civil war. Instead of appreciating this, however, news coverage on al-Hirak tends to depict it as merely a local protest movement. Since the Saudi-led intervention began, most reporting on southern Yemen has failed to comprehend the deep frustration and alienation in the South and the historical and political factors that created them.

Claims that the whole of Yemen has suffered equally under the Saleh and Hadi regimes or that al-Hirak is just a civil rights movement vastly underestimate the political agenda of the southern movement and ignore the real demands of southerners.

The Roots of Southern Frustration

The roots of al-Hirak's role in the current conflict stretch back at least twenty years. The Southern Question, that is, the relationship between the former PDRY provinces and the central Yemeni state, has been a part of Yemeni politics since the country's 1994 civil war.

After the war, the whole of southern society was politically, socially, and economically excluded to the benefit of its northern counterpart. In addition to a lack of investment in state services for the South, like healthcare and education, as well as barriers to state employment, southern grievances were fueled by arbitrary and widespread land-grabs in some of the most profitable parts of Aden and the South, by regime beneficiaries.

In 2007, the Southern Movement was established in the town of Dhala' by former army officials, who had been dismissed from their positions in the civil war's aftermath. That same year, the movement flexed its muscle, organizing a series of protests, which were joined by teachers and civil servants.

The government of then-President Saleh responded to the peaceful protest movement with violence, alienating large segments of the southern population. As a result of this state brutality, the movement quickly expanded beyond its initial economic demands and began calling for full independence from the North and the abrogation of the unity agreement of 1990 that had brought the North and South together.

Since then, al-Hirak has struggled to realize its objective of re-establishing an independent, southern Yemen. As a loose coalition of smaller political groups that are ideologically and geographically distant from one other, al-Hirak has been viewed more as a symbol of the South's desire for independence, than as a well-defined movement with a clear political ideology.

This is largely due to the fact that disparate local political conditions and historical narratives have shaped attitudes toward re-establishing an independent southern state. Popular support for an independent South decreases the further east of Aden one goes, partly because of negative experiences with the PDRY's centralized socialist rule, as well as local perceptions that the eastern part of southern Yemen, Hadhramaut and al-Mahra, could have its own viable economy based on local resources, such as oil and gas.

From al-Hirak's early days, a universally recognized leadership has also remained elusive. The movement has largely been made up of relatively unknown

young southern activists, and older politicians who held prominent positions during the socialist era, but live mostly in exile today. This plurality of voices, coupled with the older – oftentimes discredited – political élite’s tendency to compete for political dominance in the South, left the movement without a clear direction or representation in various political processes that began after President Saleh’s removal in 2011, including the implementation of Yemen’s so-called transition to a more democratic and accountable political order.

This lack of cohesion was starkly apparent during the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), which ran from March 2013 to January 2014, and aimed to address the country’s major political, social, and economic crises. Mainly because of the government’s inability to implement confidence-building measures for the South and the southern working group’s failure to come up with tangible solutions for the region, the majority of Hiraki activists in the South rejected the NDC’s results, although almost half of the delegates at the conference were supposedly acting as representatives for southern Yemen, or were at least of southern origin.

On top of this, for much of its history, al-Hirak has been locked in a cycle of public protests and expressions of civil disobedience with little effect on the ground. The so-called milliuniyyahs (million-people demonstrations) are among al-Hirak’s most notable protest events, during which southern identity and commonality have been performed and reaffirmed both for Yemen and the wider world. These protests, which have regularly taken place on the anniversaries of important historical events for the South, have not had long-term political effects.

To a certain extent, however, some of this changed after Saleh and the Houthi forces advanced on the South in the spring of 2015.

A Brief Unifying Movement

Over February and March 2015, Saleh loyalists and Houthi forces began to expand from Sana’a to the southern part of Yemen. Although they were ostensibly pursuing President Hadi, who had fled to Aden with his cabinet on February 21, their objective was to seize as much territory as possible to boost their legitimacy as Yemen’s de facto political authority and enjoy a stronger position in any future negotiations. The relentlessness with which the Saleh/Houthi forces attacked Aden suggested an intention to punish the city and its inhabitants in ways similar to what happened during the 1994 civil war.

Led mostly by Saleh-loyalists, the assault devastated the city of Aden and obliterated much of the local cultural heritage. Sites that were of particular importance to the collective southern imagination, and had served as symbols of the South's multicultural, modern identity, like local churches and remnants of its colonial British past, were particularly targeted. In this way, the advance promoted the notion of an oppressive northern regime bent on subjugating the South, and highlighted the untenable nature of Yemeni unity.

The Saleh/Houthi offensive in the Spring of 2015, together with the ransacking of Aden between April and June of that year, brought the Southern Movement to the forefront of political and military developments in the region. In response to northern aggression, hiraki activists in the western part of the South, which had come under sustained attack from the Saleh/Houthi forces, organized themselves into what became known as the Southern Resistance.

With former PDRY military officers providing training and commanding ragtag units, young men who had refused to rally in the milliuniyahs became local 'heroes' who defended Aden and eventually pushed the Saleh/Houthi forces out of the city, with critical help from the UAE.

Southern Yemen as War Booty

While the aims and motivations of the Southern Resistance were largely absent from media coverage, reporting on the South has most certainly spiked since the Saudi-led intervention. Once the Saleh/Houthi forces advanced beyond Sana'a in February 2015 and President Hadi escaped to Aden, southern Yemen became contested ground in the country's civil war and much more interesting to international media outlets.

The Saleh/Houthi alliance and the Hadi/Saudi coalition fought to control strategic parts of the South, in order to demonstrate their ability to win the war, as well as their popular support. As a result, southern Yemen became part of a discursive media battle, in which each side sought to justify its actions and augment its achievements. This framing of the war left little space for the voices of southern activists to be heard, and allowed warring parties to manipulate perceptions about the Southern Resistance's role and allegiance.

In the pro-Hadi media, the Southern Resistance was depicted as supporting the ousted president and Saudi-led coalition. When Hadi arrived in Aden, he declared the city Yemen's temporary capital and began trying to form a credible military force to counter the Saleh/Houthi offensive. Having failed at this, he was forced to leave for Saudi Arabia on March 20, 2015, along with his

cabinet.

But, the Saudi-led coalition and government-in-exile used the fact that some of the militias defending Aden had been raised by Hadi's government, together with his roots in Abyan, to claim that those defending the city were 'Hadi loyalists'. This narrative was also quickly adopted by the majority of Arab and Western media, to demonstrate the Hadi government's legitimacy and justify the Saudi intervention.

At the same time, the pro Saleh/Houthi media portrayed their alliance as representing the national will and described their military campaign in the South as liberating the southern provinces from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). On this later point, the media adopted two strategies. First, it used AQAP's presence to warn Arab and Western governments of the risks associated with a potentially AQAP-controlled independent South. Second, it portrayed the Saudi coalition as colluding with a terrorist organization. In this way, pro-Saleh/Houthi media exploited the fact that the AQAP had moved in to fill the vacuum left by receding army units loyal to Saleh in parts of the South. It also underscored the fact that AQAP militants had helped defend Aden from the Houthi/Saleh forces, in what they saw as a Shiite advance on Sunni territory.

Of course, the reality on the ground was quite different from how it was represented. The Southern Resistance fought under the former PDRY flag and, although it opposed the Saleh/Houthi alliance, it had different, long-term objectives from the Saudi coalition regarding the future of an independent South. Apart from rejecting the NDC's proposal that Yemen be divided into federal entities, the Southern Movement and Resistance have been unequivocal in their demand for southern self-determination and have rejected any attempt to revive the Gulf Cooperation Council's failed transitional process, which brought the Hadi government to power.

Challenges to Covering the South

These and other problems with media coverage on al-Hirak and the South are not entirely surprising. Thanks to government restrictions and a deteriorating security situation, it has long been difficult for journalists to access, let alone, adequately report on events in the region.

From the mid-2000s, onwards the Saleh regime pursued a deliberate strategy of isolating Yemen's southern provinces, Aden, in particular, from all forms of economic, commercial, and cultural relations with both the West and other

Arab countries. This has had a detrimental effect on the quality and volume of reporting on the South.

By 2010, the number of direct international flights to Aden had dwindled; foreign consulates and educational institutes were closed down in quick succession; and international NGOs were actively discouraged from taking up projects in the southern part of the country. The Saleh regime persecuted journalists who reported on developments in the South, a practice that reached its peak with the closure of Aden's al-Ayyam newspaper in May 2009 and the subsequent shelling of its headquarters by Yemeni army units in January 2010.

As security in the South gradually deteriorated after 2007, the region became a virtual no-go zone for most foreign reporters. Coupled with the Saudi blockade on journalists since the start of its intervention, and the international media's disinterest in Yemen, it is easy to understand why the Southern Movement and Question have received little attention.

A Wide Gap

The Saudi intervention in Yemen brought the country to the forefront of international media, albeit for a brief period of time. But, thanks to the nature of the conflict and virtually complete blockade on media reporting from Yemen, Western news outlets have failed to accurately represent both the southern perspective and events taking place across the country.

For these reasons, there is a wide gulf between the ways in which the Southern Movement and its agenda have been depicted outside Yemen, and how southerners themselves think of their predicament.

Southerners feel that the injustices perpetrated against the South by the Saleh and Hadi regimes have not received adequate attention from the international community. They perceive their struggle to be one of national liberation and determination, and not as a minority rights issue. Coupled with a lack of access to and representation in various diplomatic negotiations currently taking place to end the war, southern society has been alienated, now more than ever, from ongoing political processes in Yemen.