

## Opinion – Civil War’s Splinters Indicate a Fractured Future for Yemen

Written by Poornima B

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POORNIMA B, SEP 12 2020

Local sources, on 3 September, have claimed that the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) has appointed a new governor for Socotra, the largest of the four islands in the Socotra Archipelago. Earlier that week, violent clashes erupted between the STC forces and the Saudi-backed government forces near the Socotra airport to drive the Yemeni troops away and reinstate STC, hence, UAE's full control over the island. On 25 August 2020, the STC in Yemen dispatched a letter to Saudi Arabia to convey its intention of withdrawing from the Riyadh Agreement. In its official statement, the STC said that while it still adheres to the Riyadh Agreement, it questioned the Yemeni government's commitments to the Agreement by citing many reasons for its claims.

First, the Yemeni government's reported violation of the ceasefire that was arrived at in June and its military escalations in the Abyan governorate. Second, the attacks by extremist forces such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) supposedly with the support of the government forces in the southern regions including the governorates of Abyan, Shabwa, Hadhramaut and Al-Mahrah. Third, President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's government's continuing neglect of the welfare of the people of the southern region including their health and poor living standards, which has led to the failure of public services in the southern governorates. Fourth, mistreatment of the people of the region with false-arrests and torture in prisons. Lastly, the government's neglect that has resulted in the collapse of the Yemeni currency, in turn causing inflation of goods and services in the southern governorates, leaving them in a deplorable situation.

This is the third time since the signing of the Riyadh Agreement in November 2019, the STC has reneged from cooperating to implement the provisions of the Agreement framed to mend the crack in the Saudi-led coalition forces. The June ceasefire brought the clashes between the STC forces and the government forces under control and provided a platform for the resumption of the efforts to execute the Agreement. Despite such measures, once again the process has been interrupted with the STC's recent announcement, challenging the prospects of the Saudi-led coalition's fight against the Houthi rebels. Even if the parties to the Agreement seal their commitment to cooperate once again, several other challenges will come on the way. However, a brief look into the history of how the civil war has panned out and the course taken by the Riyadh Agreement will help in understanding the hurdles it has been facing so far.

The civil war in Yemen is a major part of the vestiges of the Arab Spring that rocked the Middle East in 2011. Yemen was one of the first countries to be affected by it. The uprising developed into a civil war and was further escalated with foreign intervention. The unfolding of the on-going crisis sped up in 2015 with the Houthi rebels capturing the capital city Sana'a and Saudi forces entering the war with retaliatory airstrikes. Currently, the major warring parties in the Yemen civil war are the Yemeni government forces and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) supported by Saudi Arabia as well as the UAE and the Iran-backed Houthi Rebels. The Islamic State and AQAP have been adding to the chaos with their small-scale yet impactful attacks.

Over time, as a result of unaligned interests and unkept promises, the STC and President Hadi's government forces found themselves locking horns, fighting a "civil war within a civil war". Through the months, the STC took control of Aden, rising the tensions between the government forces and the predominantly-UAE-backed STC.

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To patch the rift formed among the anti-Houthi coalition, Saudi Arabia mediated a series of negotiations between the Yemeni government and STC from 20 August to 24 October resulted in two conflicting parties signing the Riyadh Agreement on 05 November 2019. However, in 2020, STC suspended its participation in the committees set up to implement the agreement blaming the Hadi government of neglecting its interests. Intensifying confrontations due to STC's self-rule declaration in Aden and Socotra gave a clarion call to the Saudi Arabian leadership to institute a ceasefire as well as alter some provisions in the Agreement to persuade the STC. The revised Agreement gives 50 per cent representation to the STC in the new government that is to be formed. It also provides for restructuring the defence forces and allocation of resources, with proportional benefits to the southern governorates. Nevertheless, in less than a month the arrangement broke down. In addition to the issues mentioned by the Council, there are other hurdles in the way of the Agreement's implementation process.

Anti-Emirati sentiment running in the Yemen government ranks might probably lead UAE to be intransigent about including those officials in the new government that is to be formed under the Agreement's guidelines. Moreover, the Agreement calls for Saudi Arabia's overwhelming presence in UAE-strongholds in southern Yemen.

The implementation of the Riyadh Agreement has been Saudi Arabia's top agenda in Yemen as it lies in its best interests to unify the two major anti-Houthi camps to solidify the Saudi-led coalition. By ousting the Houthi rebels from holding major portions of Yemen, Saudi Arabia looks to suppress Iran's sphere of influence in the country.

Yemen is located near one of the most important International Sea Lines and strategic chokepoints that pave the way to significant proportions of world trade. UAE has significantly invested in southern Yemen to make sure its maritime trade remains uninterrupted, which seems to be its primordial priority in Yemen. Unconfirmed reports of the UAE purportedly setting up a spy base in Socotra and of the Israeli media praising the UAE's take-over of the sites to protect the maritime route that leads to Israel's Eilat port have been surfacing. One cannot say with certainty that the island, situated in a strategic location in the Indian Ocean, is not used also for intelligence collection. The blooming bonhomie between Israel and the UAE has made the situation much more precarious.

Qatar has seemingly been funding the Al Islah Party, a close affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood, that has its considerably destructive presence in the Shabwa governorate. The militiamen supported by the Al Islah Party were instrumental in sowing seeds of confrontation between the STC and government forces in the southern provinces of Yemen. Qatar's largesse has made the Al Islah party wield influence enough to cause instability.

Since the dismantling of the Shabwani Elite forces in August 2019, the tentacles of the AQAP have re-emerged across the southern governorates partly as a result of the government forces-STC rift. Government-led offensives and the US drone strikes have been able to eliminate the top orders of this extremist outfit. Nevertheless, the group prevails to be a destabilizing entity in Yemen, capable of pulling its fragments together

The success of the proceedings of the Riyadh Agreement will mostly depend on the conviction of the local parties to resolve the civil war in Yemen by eliminating destructive agents. At the same time, it also depends on whether Saudi Arabia and UAE will be able to work on their difference and meet each other half the way, the probability of which seems to be currently dicey. The fog that presents a vague picture of the Saudi-led coalition forces is likely to further complicate Yemen's geopolitical disposition. Adding to the civil war and its splinters, the revival of the Islamic State and AQAP, compounded by natural disasters such as floods will push Yemen deep into the mare's nest.

The COVID-19 outbreak and the recent floods followed by heavy torrential rain has inflamed the refugee crisis in the war-torn country. Marib, the worst-affected province due to the flood, was considered to be the safest from the violence of the civil war. People who saw a safe haven in the province are now stranded on the road without a house and unable to observe social distancing norms. Yemen's seemingly fractured future holds nothing but catastrophe to its people if attempts at seeking a political resolution do not succeed. There appears to be more to the Yemeni civil war than what meets the eye.

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