Risk Analysis: The future of South Yemen in light of Saudi influence and North’s chaos



April 15, 2020

South24 Center for News and Studies

Ayad Qassem, Bader Qasim Mohammad

Introduction

Before operation "Decisive Storm" was launched and the Saudi-led Arab coalition announced on March 25, 2015 the start of its military raids in Yemen, with the aim of countering the expansion of Houthi militias and Ali Abdullah Saleh's forces towards the strategic areas of South Yemen [1], the southern fighters "southern resistance" were, on their own, engaged in fierce battles on several fronts [2], unlike the northern regions of Yemen, most of which have fallen under the control of the Iran-backed "Ansar Allah" (Houthis).

These vast differences in the will of the southerners to resist the militias and forces coming from the north, stemmed mainly from prominent political and historical factors, the vanguard of which was the inherent national identity of the people of South Yemen, "South Arabian", and was reinforced by the extensive exclusionary policies practiced by the central regime in Sanaa after the 1990 unity, which led to two major wars in 1994 and 2015 by the religious conservative North against the secular South. [3]

After liberating the regions of South Yemen with the active Emirati participation and support from the Arab coalition in the same year 2015, it does not seem that most of the "rival" forces in North Yemen benefit from the mistakes of recent history, at least for now, towards effective, logical and responsible engagement with the issue of their forcibly excluded partners from the “fragmented republic”. Even as the Houthi Shi’ite group expanded control of government strongholds there.

The insistence on imposing policies of the North on the South continues to export chaos and wars in this strategic geographical region, which is important to global maritime security, which also motivates regional countries to reserve a share of control and influence in this area. [4]

The imposing policies of the North on the South continues to export chaos and wars in this strategic geographical region, which also motivates regional countries to reserve a share of control and influence in this area.

And because the last war prompted the southerners to take advices seriously and go towards arranging their political papers in a way that enhances the chances of success of their political demands on the one hand and arranging their security and military affairs on the other hand. The establishment of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in the region was the result of years of struggle by the southern national movement (Hirak) that started in 2007. Even though small and limited, there are members of Hirak who preferred to stay with parties that oppose the policy of the regional alliances of STC.

Those members, especially those within the government of President Hadi, were the tools best suited to the northern military elite, run by Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, and its allies in the region, to keep the situation in South Yemen tense. This prompted to the exploding of the situation more than once in the capital Aden, which in August 2019 led to the expulsion of government ministers from Aden and the expansion of the council's control over four strategic governorates in the south, while the government controlled the oil-rich Governorate ,"Shabwa", and parts of Socotra Archipelago. [5] The northeastern desert of Hadhramaut remains under the control of the first military area of the Yemeni Vice President, while Saudi Arabia has strengthened the presence of its forces in the eastern “Mahrah” Governorate bordering with the Sultanate of Oman.

Riyadh Agreement's future

The Riyadh agreement signed between the Southern Transitional Council and the Yemeni government on April 5, 2019, under Saudi patronage, represented a strategic and military change in the history of the Yemeni crisis and its parties in the region.

On the one hand, the agreement marked the end of a process for the most effective role of Emirati forces in war and reconstruction, in South Yemen, after the UAE announced the withdrawal of its participating military and human forces from there, thereby giving a place to Saudi forces to take the lead in Aden, on the other hand.

While the Southern Transitional Council considered the Riyadh agreement a gain, during which it managed to extract political and international legitimacy, and opened up for the “southern issue” promising future opportunities for a solution by participating in any upcoming peace negotiations, critics saw it as a dedication to the principle of power-sharing, and a real deportation of the reality that was supposed to be resolved Militarily on the ground, without engaging in losing political maneuvers. [6]

This agreement has not been implemented yet, and it has become a candidate for collapse, according to international experts and observers. [7] The military forces of each party to the conflict in South Yemen are still in their previous positions. The military reinforcements coming from Ma'rib towards Shabwa Governorate and “Shoqra” District, east of Abyan, continue to flow. On Sunday evening, April 12th, the Southern Resistance was able to target military reinforcements. Local residents said that they were coming to reinforce the northern general, Saeed Moili, in Abyan. Southerners accuse the Muslim Brotherhood's wing of Yemen, the Reform [ISLAH]Party, of fueling the conflict.

The agreement gave the Saudi administration propaganda about its ability to make peace and its impact on the conflicting parties there. However, until the latter, it practically evaporated in South Yemen, after Saudi Arabia prevented four prominent officials from leading the Southern Transitional Council from returning to Aden on March 13.

Riyadh exercises a policy of "anesthesia" in achieving the greatest amount of its influence through a soft change of the pieces of "chess", which gives it the greatest loyalty in the

difficult-to-reach region, while keeping its position on southern demands largely ambiguous.

The Yemeni government is also in a state of widespread division. An economic lobby led by influential businessman Ahmed Al-Essa tries to invest in the government for personal influence interests. A number of ministers have become agents for the businessman within the government. Meanwhile, other ministers have implemented the Islah party's agenda most influencing President Hadi's decision. Corruption and conflict over money within the government led to a broad collapse that was reflected in its actions and its performance on various economic and political files.

The Saudi-led Arab coalition announcing a two-week ceasefire in Yemen on April 9, fearing another catastrophe could cause a possible spread of the emerging covid-19. But the United Nations' invitation to the Yemeni government and the Houthis for "hypothetical" talks to achieve a ceasefire, based on proposals submitted as a primary basis for the dialogue process, which the Southern Transitional Council has excluded from this, reduces the chances of success of the initiative and the international efforts in light of the nature of the Yemeni crisis in general.[8] Moreover, this could constitute a real end to the Riyadh Agreement, which was sponsored by Saudi Arabia, and opens the door wide for a new phase of war and instability.

Riyadh is betting on its relationship with the United Arab Emirates to implement its independent agenda without provoking a new conflict between the Transitional Council and government forces. Riyadh exercises a policy of "anesthesia" in achieving the greatest amount of its influence through a soft change of the pieces of "chess", which gives it the greatest loyalty in the difficult-to-reach region, while keeping its position on southern demands largely ambiguous.

This is revealed by the attempt of government forces to control the islands of Socotra Archipelago, and the continued flow of military reinforcements coming from Marib, which is heading towards the stronghold of government forces in Abyan and Saudi military support for the forces close to the Saudi leader of the coalition in Aden, on the borders of Al-Bayda Governorate. In addition to the frequent landing of military aircraft carrying recruits to Aden, that received training on Saudi soil.[9]

Peace and chaos of conflict in the north

While the Southern Transitional Council welcomed the Arab coalition's initiative to stop the ceasefire in Yemen, the Yemeni government had no share of the call for peace of any kind, except for its exile welcome far away. A head shake from President Hadi does this.

Meanwhile, the silence of the wing around President Hadi, like the Muslim Brotherhood (Islah), appears suspicious enough to deny the validity of the popular saying that "silence is a sign of contentment."

The Brotherhood's ideological background still does not favor obedience to outside warnings of the dangers of covid-19 epidemic, and its political and media performance tends to be categorized within the "conspiracy theory" targeting the Islamic nation as it urges its organizational elements to this belief. Likewise, the Islamic Houthi group.

Consequently, any call for peace makes the spread of Covid-19 a major reason for concluding an agreement, even if only temporarily, that the two Islamic groups cannot accept. From the first day that the UN envoy and the Arab coalition called on the Houthis to accept peace that the threat of the spread of the Corona pandemic poses as a fait accompli, the Houthis have laid out their own initiative for another peace as a "response" to what they consider political maneuvers. [10]

The Brotherhood's ideological background still does not favor obedience to outside warnings of the dangers of covid-19 epidemic and its political and media performance tends to categorize it as “conspiracy theory” targeting the Islamic nation.

The leaders of the first row of the group questioned the intentions of the international and Saudi parties, reinforced by the Houthis continuing their military operations bent on toppling Marib with the aim of achieving military superiority before increasing international pressure on them to accept peace they do not want now. They are well aware of the consequences of their late military decision to battle the control of Marib, and that their slowdowns will push the fierce Sunni tribes to spark a sectarian war that threatens the Houthis' control of the desert lands in Marib and Al-Jawf.

The Houthis, since the beginning of the war, have avoided provoking this sectarian strife by standing peacefully in the areas of "Naham and Sarwah". They succeeded

in creating a northern-northern and Sunni-Shiite peace. The fact that personalities of Zaidi origins - and even Brotherhood-affiliated members of the Islah Party - remained in the leadership of the National Army as well as the governmental government department in Marib, contributed to maintaining the common interests between Sana'a and Marib.

But, returning to the situation in southern Yemen, some may ask: What is driving the military leaders from Marib, the oil and wealth rich province, to join the ranks of the government forces that headed south to Shabwa and Abyan, to fight against the southern forces of the Southern Transitional Council instead of fighting The Houthis that are standing now with their huge military equipment on the outskirts of Marib?

To explain such a strange event: When the northern general and some of his soldiers from Marib went to fight the South, they went to defend what they believed to be a "Yemeni unit" from the danger of the efforts of the southern transitional council for the independence of the South from the North, at a time when the Houthis were previously in complete harmony with Marib-Al-Jouf's tribes and nothing between them raises sectarian conflict.

After the Riyadh agreement between the STC and Hadi's government, some government military forces went from the South to Marib, in North Yemen. An operation was carried out with the bombing of more than 100 soldiers, mostly southerners. The Houthis could not claim responsibility for this heinous incident, especially since it was carried out in a worship mosque where the soldiers were not in a combat position. [11]

This incident marked the practical end of a truce between the Houthis and the Muslim Brotherhood, which allowed the fronts between Marib and Sanaa to be ignite and the war entered the stage of seriousness after 5 years of prevarication.

Because the Brotherhood forces in Marib did not accustom to this type of seriousness in the war, they resorted to the voluntary surrender for the Houthis, which allowed the rapid and massive collapse of the forces of the legitimate government. Within a few days, the Houthis expanded and dropped the "Naham" mountains, and then they went to drop the directorates of Al-Jawf Governorate in a row, and they stood on the outskirts of Marib Governorate, waiting for the opportunity to devour it.

Out of pseudo-patriotism, Marib wanted to preserve Yemen's unity, and Sanaa wanted to overthrow and control Marib to gain wealth and oil.

conclusion

The continuation of the inconclusive political approach and the patching of political solutions without taking the roots and causes of the crisis in South Yemen, does not lead at all to the success of any lasting peace process. The continuing conflict and neglect of implementing the Riyadh agreement threatens the stability of Yemen and the region in general.

So far, the UN Secretary-General's envoy does not seem to take the kernel of the crisis in the south and its possible consequences. The focus of the United Nations remains on the traditional parties to the war.

Saudi measures, which recently sparked tension in South Yemen, must be stopped. The apparent disregard of the Arab coalition for the continued flow of weapons and fighters to the conflict areas in Shabwa and Abyan undermines the Riyadh agreement.

Saudi observers believe that the efforts of the Brotherhood and influential leaders within the Yemeni legitimacy for the military mobilization efforts towards Aden Governorate are returning matters to square one, i.e. before the Jeddah dialogue and the Riyadh agreement. [12]

The absence of the actors in southern Yemen from any future talks, will also provide an opportunity to enhance the influence of extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and Muslim Brotherhood

The STC is totally betting on the success of the Riyadh agreement so far and still trusts in the promises made by Saudi Arabia regarding its just sponsorship of the agreement. An alternative strategy if the agreement fails, is necessary, preventing the region from sliding into chaos.

The Transitional Council has steps recommended for completion. The efforts of the Calming Committee, led by prominent southern military forces between the South-South's forces on both sides of the conflict there, could end sporadic fighting and significantly enhance stability in the region. It may increase the chances of success of peace efforts, as well as enhance social cohesion among some tribes, which have been affected recently by recent events.

The divided Yemeni government remains unable to deal seriously with the crisis in South Yemen. The state of conflict over the money and positions inside it prevents

its efforts to focus on implementing its obligations from the Riyadh agreement, and it also gives extremists inside it the opportunity to fuel the fighting.

The prolongation of the conflict, in the absence of a real mechanism to end the war, and the absence of the actors in southern Yemen from any future talks, will also provide an opportunity to enhance the influence of extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and Muslim Brotherhood, and allow other regional states that support them, such as Turkey, to enhance their influence there and in the important water areas in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. [13]

- ***Ayad Qassem****: writer and researcher on Yemeni affairs, director of the South24 Center for News and Studies*

- ***Badr Qasim Mohammad****: writer and researcher in Islamic and extremist groups affairs, a fellow at the South24 Center for Studies, publishes with Al-Ayyam and other local newspapers.*

References

[1] لقاء الحزم والحسم.. محمد بن سلمان محذراً نجل صالح: عدن خط أحمر، الجزيرة، 29 مارس 2015

[2] اشتباكات عنيفة بين المقاومة الجنوبية وقوات اللواء 33 في الضالع، الأيام، 30 مارس 2015

[3] إشكالية الهوية في اليمن.. محور الصراعات الظاهرة والخفية، التغيير، مارس 2016

[4] صحيفة لندنية: زيادة النفوذ التركي في جنوب اليمن يثير قلق القاهرة، سوث24، 12 أبريل 2020

[5] اليمن.. "قوات الانتقالي" تستعيد السيطرة على عدن، الحرة، 29 أغسطس 2019

[6] تقرير: ماذا لو رفض المجلس الانتقالي اتفاقية الرياض؟، سوث24، 10 نوفمبر 2019

[7] Riyadh Agreement at risk of collapse in southern Yemen، المونيتور، 6 أبريل 2020

[8] تصريح صحفي صادر عن الإدارة العامة للشؤون الخارجية، المجلس الانتقالي، 9 أبريل 2020

[9] دفعة مجندين تدربوا في السعودية تصل إلى عدن، المصدر أون لاين، 31 مارس 2020

[10] هدنة التحالف باليمن.. الحوثيون يتهمون السعودية بالمناورة ومواصلة الحرب، الجزيرة، 09 أبريل 2020

[11] تفاصيل جديدة.. محارق الموت في مأرب تحصد أرواح عشرات الجنوبيين، سوث24، 19 يناير 2020

[12] منطقة شقرة، ومصير اتّفاق الرياض، ليفانت نيوز، 13 أبريل 2020

[13] Growing Turkish interference in Yemen stirs concern in Cairo، ذا ارب ويكلي، 12 أبريل 2020