The Original Sin of Yemen

By *Garrett Khoury,*

March28, 2015

Understanding the current crisis in Yemen means re-examining the country’s unification process.

These are not good times for Yemen. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, widely believed to be the most potent offspring of Osama bin Laden’s original organization, has taken up residence in the arid and rugged east and launches regular attacks around the country. Houthi rebels, a militant Zaydi Shi’a group from the mountainous far north of Yemen, have gone from small-time irritations a decade ago to overthrowing the government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, declaring their own provisional authority from the capital of Sana’a, and now taking control of large swathes of the country. The morning of March 26th saw a Saudi Arabian-led coalition of Arab states (mainly from the Gulf Cooperation Council) launch airstrikes around Yemen, targeting Houthi positions and political figures. On top of all of this, Yemen is widely believed to be the first country that is going to run out of water.

Each issue is a crisis on its own, but combined together are making the world question Yemen’s viability as a state. When the biggest debate about a country is whether it’s a failed state or just a failing state, that means the situation is quite dire.

One issue, though, connects all of these, and indeed aggravates the entire situation in the country. It was a problem before the Houthis, before AQAP, and even before the water supply was much thought about. The issue is the North-South divide, still alive and well 25 years after the formal unification of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People’s

Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). 21 years after the civil war in the newly reunified country between Northern and Southern forces ended in a victory for the former, secession of the lands formerly comprising South Yemen is still a very real issue.

The Southern Movement is the catch-all term for the many groups in southern Yemen advocating for a number of ends, from simple civil rights and empowerment to outright independence and the re-establishment of South Yemen. The popularity of the Southern Movement has been growing since its birth in 2007, when retired South Yemeni military officers demanded better treatment, and has only been spurred on by the events of the Arab Spring.

More recently, photographs showing forces loyal to President Hadi often contain something that goes overlooked. It’s a flag, the traditional red-white-black tricolor of Yemen, with deep red star superimposed over a sky blue triangle; the flag of South Yemen. Among other things, the current crisis in Yemen is also the latest clash between the forces of north and south in the country.

How did it become such a problem? Why, so long after unification, is this still the major internal conflict for Yemen?

Yemen is not the first country to unify after a period of division, or come back together after a civil war. The United States fought a civil war, and now the North-South divide is more a friendly rivalry than anything else. West Germany and East Germany reunited after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and now constitutes one of the world’s foremost powers. It has been the opposite in Yemen, though. Unification has, if anything, exacerbated regional divisions. The answer lays within the framework of that very unification. The answer to the persistence of the North-South divide is due to the unification of Yemen never truly being completed, and reconciliation after the 1994 Civil War never being genuinely being attempted.

Part I:

Unified Disunity-The Incomplete Merging of North and South

Militiamen loyal to President Hadi in Aden, Yemen. Note the flag. (STR/AFP/Getty Images)

For most of the 20th century prior to 1962, North Yemen was known as the Mutawakkilite Kingdom of Yemen, ruled by

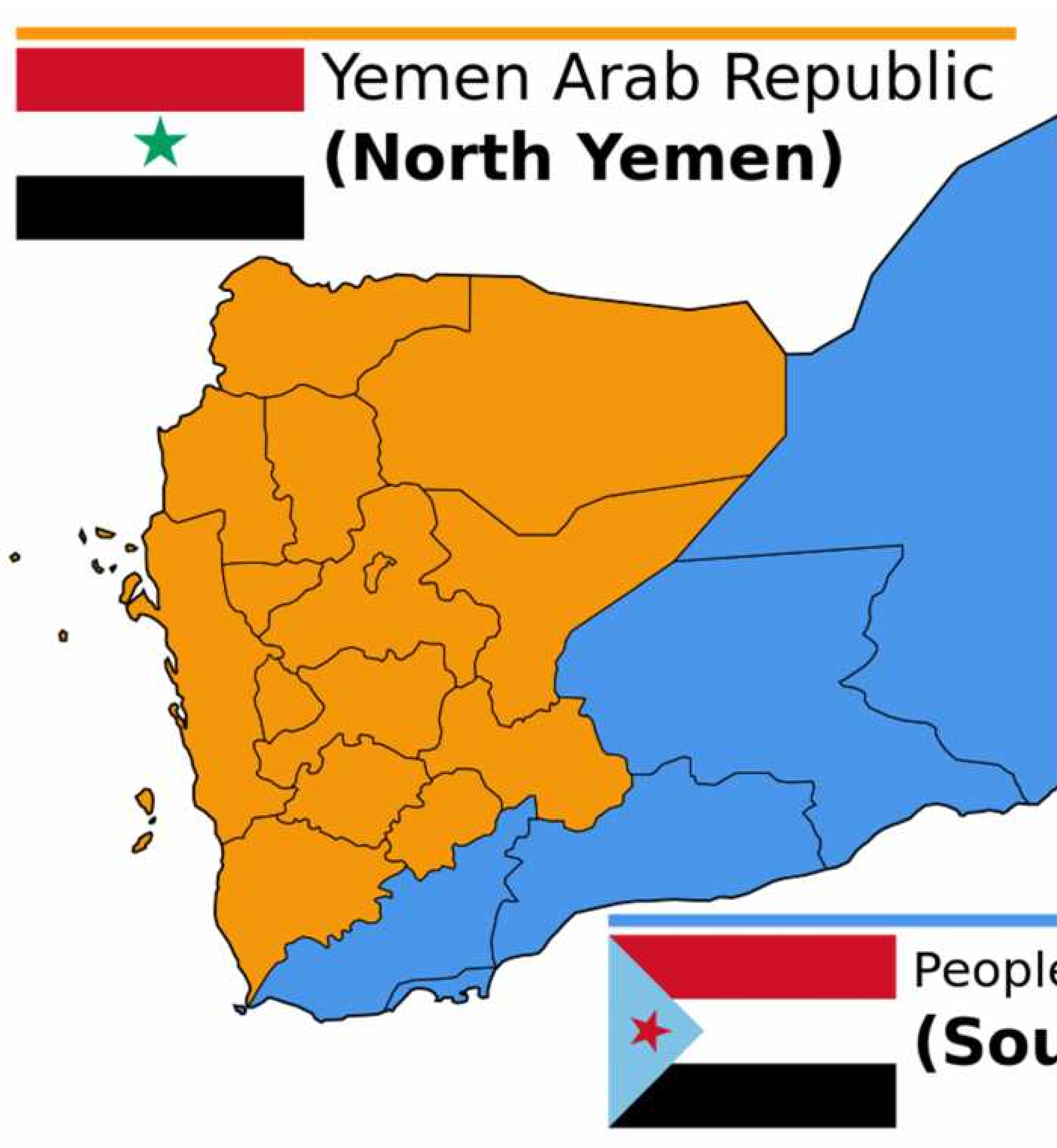
Zaydi Shi’a Imams from their capital at Sana’a after breaking away from Ottoman rule.

In 1962, a revolution in the spirit of Gamal abdel Nasser and Pan-Arabism overthrew the last Imam and founded the Yemen Arab Republic, setting off a civil war that would last for the rest of the 1960s, even with heavy intervention in favor of the republicans.

It became a proxy war in a region full of them, with Jordan and Saudi Arabia, backed by the United Kingdom and United States, supporting royalist forces, while Nasser’s Egypt and its Soviet backers propped up the republicans. The devastating defeat of Egypt in the June 1967 War with Israel forced their withdrawal from the conflict, and the civil war eventually petered out as royalists and republicans reconciled and joined in a new government. This new arrangement was fragile, though, and North Yemen lost two Presidents to assassinations before Ali Abdullah Saleh took control of the General People’s Congress (GPC), the official state party, and became president in 1978.

“Historical Yemen was a cultural entity rather than a political unit,” as Carapico describes, “its formal divisions stemmed from British imperialism in the south.” The British presence in South Yemen stretches back to the 19th century, when they took control of the strategic port of Aden, and spread their influence and control from there. Their rule persisted until 1963, when another Nasser-inspired rebellion broke out, forcing the British to completely withdraw in 1967, after which the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen was founded, with the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) at its helm. Politics in South Yemen were every bit as treacherous as in the North, with the most brutal display coming in 1986.

During a brief civil war for control of the YSP and the government, forces of then-president Ali Muhammad Nassir fought with those of his predecessor, Abdul Fattah Ismail. In a stunning opening move, Nassir actually had his bodyguards open fire during a meeting of the ruling politburo, killing key members. When the civil war was over, after two weeks of bloody fighting, Ali Salim al-Bid was the only one left standing, and so he became the new leader of South Yemen.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North and South Yemen

North and South Yemen engaged in a border war in 1972, and again in 1979. In both cases, the fighting was ended with pledges to pursue unity. A CIA report from 1990 on the possibility of Yemeni unification notes almost sardonically that

“North and South Yemen have pursued unity since 1972 in a series of meetings. Their efforts have led to a number of stillborn agreements…that redundantly spell out conditions for a joint state.”

The CIA, like many at the time, were only judging the two states by how they appeared. “Unlike the relatively isolated independent North, where a semi-feudal agrarian society persisted, the South developed capitalist classes, markets, and enterprises,” wrote Carapico. Cold War dynamics didn’t leave out the Yemens, with North Yemen being an American ally and South Yemen being a staunch Soviet ally.

The truth, though, was less readily apparent. South Yemen was never quite as socialist and the North never quite as capitalist as the Cold War mantras had the world believe. The gulfs were bridgeable, and this was helped by the emphasis on unity coming from both governments.

Not that the unity talk was born from purely altruistic motives. As Halliday found, “the assertion of a common Yemeni identity by political leaders served to strengthen the legitimacy of each state with their own populations against outside power and against each other.” North and South Yemen’s respective leaders may not have put much stock in unity, but it had the (possibly) unintended side-effect of actually priming their peoples for unification.

From 1972 onwards, Yemenis on both sides of the border were being convinced that unification was eventually going to happen, and it would be to the benefit of all. Although engaged in near-constant border conflicts and attempts to destabilize one another, these were accompanied by “brief reconciliations and attempts at unification.” What resulted was a 1981 draft agreement on unification. As such, when the force of events in the 1980s had leaders of both countries looking for solutions, unity actually had some well-laid track to ride on.

The 1980s, especially the latter half of the decade, were painful times for both North and South Yemen. As described before, South Yemen was rocked by a brief but destructive civil war, and al-Bid's hold on power was tenuous at best. Saleh was also not exactly secure, and most were surprised that he had managed to last for so long. "The regime was encountering general resistance to its rule in the northeast," Weeden points out, "and it could be argued that unification offered a way both to distract attention from efforts to squelch protests there and to secure the help of the more disciplined southern army."

For both countries, economic factors combined to bring them to the table in a serious way. Sheila Carapico sums up the situation succinctly, saying that "both Yemens faced austerity when falling oil prices, compounded by a drop in Cold War-generated aid, reduced access to hard currency—until the discovery of oil in the border region in the mid-1980s attracted a third type of international capital from multinational petroleum companies."

Saleh, al-Bid, and their subordinates recognized that the only way for the full-potential of oil-funded development to be met was by cooperating. There was also the question of Saudi Arabia. Oil had also been discovered on the unmarked border with Saudi Arabia, and there was a feeling that only a unified Yemen could stand up to their more powerful neighbor, and the Saudis were seen as a possibly obstacle to unification.

The stalemate wasn't particularly painful, but there was growing sentiments in both Yemens that unification offered far better prospects for prosperity than the status quo. Supporters of unification would argue that a "stable, peaceful, enlarged Republic of Yemen would act as a magnet for the funds of foreign investors as well as Yemenis overseas; in particular, they made much of the untapped potential of well-located Aden, the “economic capital” of a unified Yemen, as a free port and industrialized zone. It seems like as much of a win-win situation for North and South Yemen as it did anything else.

Conditions appeared ripe and the end of the long-standing conflict and rivalry in sight. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 only provided an added impetus for unification, and fostered feelings of hope. The 1981 draft agreement was supposed to be put to a referendum in 1990 and unification completed by the end of the year. However, popular sentiment was so strongly in favor of immediate unification that the plans for a referendum were scrapped; Yemen was unified and the Republic of Yemen declared on May 22, 1990.

Al-Bid, left, and Saleh, right. (Life)

Hopes were high for the success of the new government, and new plans seemed on the surface to be quite sensible. The cabinet seat were split almost evenly between northerners and southerners, and the deputies for each would be from the other in order to foster harmonious relations. The Presidential cabinet, composed of five members, was split 3–2 in favor of the Northerners. At the top of the government, Saleh would be president while al-Bid served as vice president. A judiciary was established, and representation in the new parliament (known as the *majlis)* was divided evenly.

There was something of a honeymoon period until August 1990, when Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait. Yemen chose to side with Hussein (Saleh was staunchly pro-Hussein), and suffered the consequences; hundreds of thousands of Yemeni workers were expelled from other Gulf countries and had to return home. Remittances, a vital source of income for the country, dried up, and the new government now had nearly a million unemployed citizens to care for. Inflation skyrocketed, and food prices with it. Yemenis demanded their government do something and start making due on the promises of prosperity they had heard so often.

The lead-up to the 1993 elections only made the situation worse. By then the power-sharing unity government had "become purely a matter of gamesmanship," as Day puts it. Ministers and their deputies worked against each other, contrary to the purpose of their positions. More importantly, though, was the dramatic rise in political violence, as assassinations and intimidation targeting YSP members drove feelings of persecution among southerners. Al-Bid and other YSP members saw it as a deliberate ploy on the part of Saleh to undermine them and drive them out of politics, and also that he was using Islamists to do his dirty work.

It did not help that both Saleh and his GPC and al-Bid and his YSP had no realistic vision for the elections. Neither had participated in genuine elections before, and therefore had no idea how to temper their expectations nor how to interpret the results. The old territories of South Yemen had a fifth of the total population of the new republic, and yet the YSP remained convinced that they must retain a 50 percent share in the power. Despite signing on to an agreement that included elections, al-Bid and the other YSP leaders appear to have believed that they would remain equal partners with the GPC in the government no matter the results of the elections. Not that the YSP thought they would have any trouble, though. Al-Bid was certain that the YSP would have a great showing, bolstered by northerners who were not aligned with the GPC.

They were, however, campaigning for seats in an assembly that had been purposefully made weak. “In dividing the structure of the unified state,” Sharif finds, “the two unifying parties, the GPC and the YSP, made the *majlis* inferior, if not totally subordinate, to executive authority. Al-Bid and the YSP did not remember this, though, when they came in *third* in the elections, behind a solid majority for the GPC and a surprising second place victory for the Islamist Islah party, which had been nurtured by Saleh and was headed by a close tribal ally.

It was only after their loss that the YSP became fearful of their situation and began voicing regrets about the unification agreement. It became evident that Saleh’s main motive was to “absorb the south within the larger northern system, while marginalizing southern socialists as a dying relic of the Cold War,” and a spoils system ran rampant. Bringing in Islah to form a blocking coalition against the YSP, Saleh began to cease even paying lip service to governing with the other party in “unity.” Interestingly enough, though, the GPC, uncomfortable with its prospects for the elections, had actually offered the YSP the opportunity to merge and run a joint ticket, which was rejected as being another part of the plot to sideline southerners.

When northerners began asserting dominance throughout the government bureaucracy, the YSP began frantically calling for devolution of powers and the creation of a federal system. These calls were seen as fostering separatism, and southern complaints about widespread corruption linked to Saleh and his inner circle “were dismissed as groundless and designed to fan popular discontent.” Continuing political violence against southerners caused the YSP to accuse Saleh of using the security services, controlled by his brother, of actually trying to provoke southerners into secessionist positions, that way he could move in and crush them.

To northerners, they had given the old YSP its chance, and they had lost; they were just being sore losers. Although Saleh’s party had actually done relatively poorly in the elections, with the YSP winning seats in the north and Islah snatching away seats that would have gone to the GPC, he looked at the results and saw it as a mandate from all of Yemen, which it most certainly was not. Ever the survivalist, Saleh saw complaints from al-Bid and the YSP as just the latest in a long line of challenges to his rule that he would need to overcome.

"The logic of the situation," from both the GPC and YSP perspectives according to Hudson, "was probably 'zero-sum;' any gains for the YSP was a loss for the GPC, and vice versa." Saleh was also caught between the YSP and Islah, which was calling for changes to be made to make the constitution more in line with *shari'a* law, and was playing the part of a spoiler of sorts in attempts to broach compromise between the YSP and GPC. Political gamesmanship in the beginning had morphed into a full-scale crisis.

The two institutions that could have shepherded Yemen through these turbulent times were the army and the *majlis*. Nearly four years on from the declaration of unification, though, the armies of North and South Yemen had still not yet been integrated. The northern army was a bedrock of support for Saleh, and he was not about to let go of loyal commanders. Instead of integrating the forces, portions of each were sent to the other region, so there were some southern units in the north and some northern units in the south, each operating independently of each other (and, according the YSP, the north was receiving training and support from Iraq).

As the crisis grew more intense, it was only made worse by the fact that each party had a military at its disposal. There was no trust left between the YSP and GPC, certainly not enough to make them give up what means of force they had. As Barbara Walter notes, "once they lay down their weapons and begin to integrate their separate assets into a new united state, it becomes almost impossible to either enforce future cooperation or survive attack."

Though elected in what was considered an acceptably fair and open election by the international community, the *majlis* that was assembled in 1993 was an "uncommonly powerless and inefficient institution" according to Sharif. Saleh, for his part, undermined the *majlis* by encouraging Yemenis to appeal directly to him through their sheikhs, creating an important patronage system at the top of which he sat. Increasingly, Yemenis saw their elected assembly as not being the place where legislation was being crafted and policies decided upon.

(Courtesy of sanaabureau.wordpress.com)

As the political crisis grew worse, and some members of the *majlis* spoke of the legislature playing a mediating role, Prime Minister al-Attas actually told the *majlis* "to stay out of politics and pay attention to its business. What business was that, exactly? Nothing, of course. From a liberal international relations perspective, this lack of useful institutions would be considered a major blow to Yemeni hopes for peace and cooperation.

Surprisingly enough, the third party intervention didn't come from the United Nations, the United States, or even any Arab state; it came from the Yemeni people themselves. Frustrated at the lack of action from the *majlis,* a national dialogue committee was organized by Yemenis from across the country to try to find a way out of a stalemate that looked all to ready to break out into civil war.

This committee took it upon itself to mediate between the YSP and GPC, and it had a significant claim to legitimacy purely through the level of participation it enjoyed. “It resulted from a genuine dialogue among a broad cross-section of north and south Yemenis led by prominent social figures who were concerned about the future.”

The dialogue committee represented nothing short of a rebellion against the leadership of the GPC and YSP, away from their destructive logic that was spiraling out of control. It was an indication that consultative government could happen in Yemen, that perhaps there was a chance for liberal democracy. It produced the Document of Pledge and Accord (though the document itself has different names depending on the source), signed in Amman by Saleh and al-Bid.

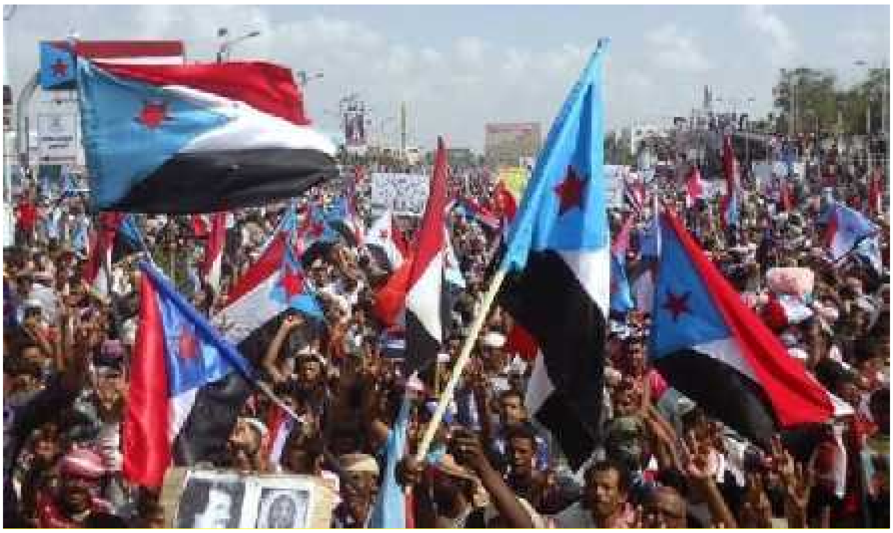
The euphoria of success didn’t even last the trip back to Yemen. Al-Bid went to Riyadh on his way back, which sent the north wild with accusations of collusion with Saudi Arabia. It did not help that he didn’t return to Sana’a to take up his position as vice president, instead opting to stay in a self-imposed exile in Aden.

The unintegrated armies began to prepare for war, which came in late April as fighting broke out between southern units in the north and local northern forces. General hostilities commenced on May 4th, as their respective air forces bombed their respective capitals. Al-Bid declared the South’s independence, despite a surprising amount of opposition from the YSP leadership, but it was short-lived; Aden was sacked on July 4th and resistance ceased a few days later. Saleh marshaled all the forces he could to fight al-Bid, including al-Bid’s old foe Ali Mohammad Nassir, whose loyalists fought alongside Saleh’s, while religious rhetoric in the north pushed the image of the war as a jihad against “infidel socialists.”

Both sides had their backers. Iraq stood solidly behind its old ally Saleh, while Saudi Arabia and Kuwait pushed for the United States to extend recognition to the new South Yemen, although the United States did little besides vote for UN Security Council Resolutions demanding an immediate ceasefire. Russia, hoping to put its once important position in Yemen to use, launched a failed diplomatic effort to become the mediator, but nothing short of victory was going to stop Saleh.

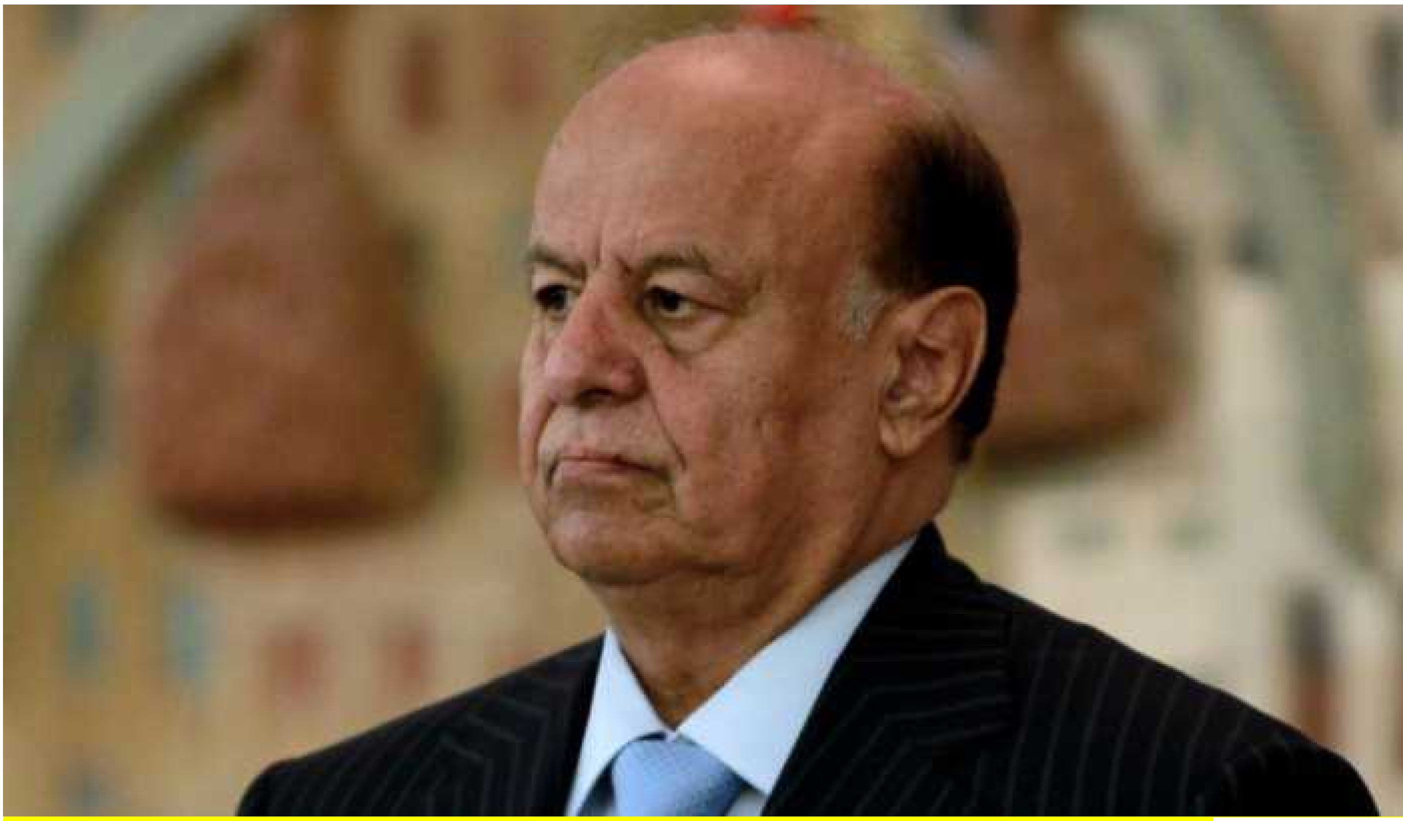
Part II:

“Internal Colonization” and False Reconciliation



Southern Movement supporters March in 2013. (AFP/File)

“Four years of effort invested in building a unified Yemen were destroyed in a matter of weeks,” Hurd and Noakes lament, “as was whatever degree of good will had been fostered between the north and south.” The YSP was completely sidelined as a political force, and indeed southerners in general were shunted aside. A token amount of southerners, solely those who had sided with Saleh, would retain some positions in the government, such as his new vice president, **Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi**.



A more recent photo of now-President Hadi (Mohammed Huwais/AFP)

The new GPC-Islah ruling coalition began rolling back the progressive initiatives of the old South Yemen, and implementing *shari'a* as the sole source of law; they also amended or added dozens of new articles of the constitution to extend more power to the executive branch.

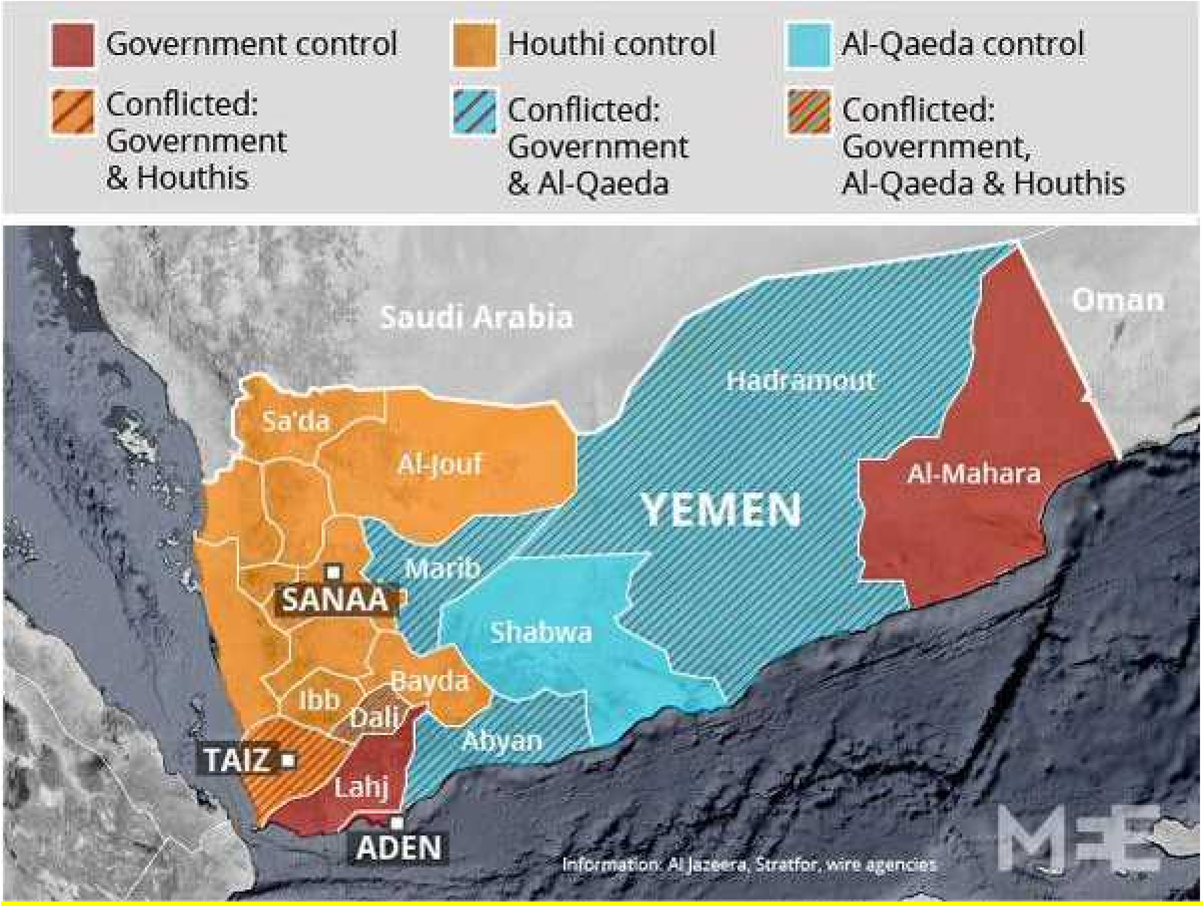
Thus began the new spoils system. Northern bureaucrats flooded south to take up even more authority, business interests carpet-bagged along with them and their more conservative and religious ways started coming down as well. With northern troops all over the south, southerners had to endure a humiliating occupation. As Day explains, "South Yemenis experienced a form of 'internal colonialism" after the civil war, falling under the control of northern politicians and military elites.

Saleh would make half-hearted (at best) gestures towards southerners, such as offering amnesty for those who fought in the civil war (but not their leaders), or appoint some to positions here and there, but always making sure to reserve the most important positions for his trusted allies.

Southerners were subdued for much of the next decade. Saleh was adept at either coercing or buying off would-be opposition movements, and his position as a solid ally in the War on Terror gave him significant leeway in his actions. It was not until 2007, with the near-simultaneous births of the groups that would come to be called the Southern Movement, that southerners began openly voicing their discontent again. Far from immediately demanding secession, though, “a major part of the demands of the people of the south seem to focus on the demands for ‘equality’ with the north in the distribution of the government a fair share of national development projects.”

The Southern Movement is a civil rights movement as much as it is anything else, seeking redress of their grievances that date back to the declaration of unification. According to Day, “the Southern Movement started as a reaction to the mishandling of Yemen’s unification over the past two decades.” The problems remained much the same as they were in 1994: economic underdevelopment, corruption, political underrepresentation, and the imposition of a northern Yemeni identity as the official Yemeni national identity.

Calls for secession, fed by al-Bid from his exile in Germany, have only become noticeable after the violent reaction of the Saleh regime after 2007, and the inaction on the part of the Hadi administration during its time, which lasted from 2012 until the end of January 2015 (although Hadi is leading an armed movement backing his continued claim to power). It remains to be seen what moves the new Houthi-led regime will take, if they will continue the policies of their predecessors in regards to treating the south, or perhaps turn a new page and launch reforms to garner support from the restive region.


Government control
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SANAA
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Information: Al Jazeera, Stratfor, wire agencies

A map of Yemen showing areas of control of various parties. (Courtesy of Middle East Eye)

The current situation between southerners and northerners is a direct result not just of the failed attempt at genuine unification, but also of a failed attempt at effective reconciliation as well. The Yemeni government has done nothing to address the concerns of southerners, instead keeping them locked into the “psychological realities of group members created by past histories,” as Staub describes. Staub notes that “renewed violence is probably an even greater danger when extreme violence is stopped by one defeating the other,” and although he was speaking of Rwanda, it is not a stretch to apply the same principle to Yemen.

There haven’t been any attempts at healing, especially at a governmental and institutional level. Southerners have spent the last two decades essentially being told to “know their place,” which only helps resentment burn hotter.

It also doesn’t help that Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has stepped in as a surprising spoiler, as they will act to undermine any work towards unity, which would be a threat to them. They actually announced their support for southern independence, which only delegitimizes the Southern Movement. It’s not that AQAP cares for the southerners, but it presents another obstacle to resolving the north-south divide.

Another obstacle is the asymmetry that was born from the demise of the YSP as an equal of the GPC. “Structurally, internal conflict is marked by asymmetry, a characteristic generally considered unconducive to negotiations,” wrote I. William Zartman, who goes on to say that “attempts to redress asymmetry only further complicate negotiation dynamics.”

There is also so much distrust built up between the parties that it makes it difficult to engage in meaningful negotiations, as Axelrod’s idea that if conflicting sides “know that they will be dealing with each other indefinitely, the necessary preconditions for cooperation will exist” has repeatedly failed to pan out for them. It’s difficult for anyone to start bargaining, as there is no history of reciprocation to build off of, and so they continue to engage in acts motivated purely by self-interest. In this case, the northern-dominated government (at least until the Houthis took over) continues to deny the legitimacy of southern claims and perpetuates conditions that could ultimately lead to a renewed outbreak of regionally-oriented violence.

Part III:

Time for a Requiem for Yemen?

Even though he has officially stepped down as President of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh continues to exercise enormous influence behind the scenes. As usually happens with such backroom powers, Saleh has been the subject of a wildly varying number of rumors. He was using the presidency of Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi as a sort of cooling off period before he would run for president again—which he was not prohibited from doing—while other rumors have him actually working with the Houthi rebels in order to regain supreme authority.

Saleh is, after all, a survivor, someone who succeeded two assassinated presidents of North Yemen and won a civil war after unification. It’s hard for Yemenis to see him as not trying to edge his way right back to where he spent the greater part of the last four decades.

It’s easy to blame Saleh for everything, as just about every wrong turn taken, bad policy initiated, slight and grievance aggravated during the unification process (and to this day) can be connected right to him. However, he remains only the poster child for a wider problem: Yemen’s leaders clearly weren’t ready for unification. There must be an emphasis placed on leaders, as the population in general showed themselves heavily in favor and highly receptive to unification.

Though there were societal differences, most dramatically illustrated by the Zaydi highlanders from the North on the one hand and the petty bourgeoisie from Aden on the other, the support for the elections and for a peaceful solution for the political crisis of 1993–1994 by the Yemeni people show that the problem wasn’t so much with them as it was with the people that had been leading them, as exemplified by Saleh and Ali Salim al-Bid.

“The fact that the Yemenis, North and South, felt a sense of common identity on a cultural, historical, and social level was in itself no guarantee that *political* integration could be taken for granted,” as Hudson stated, “in fact, beneath the surface of politics the two political establishments that had been joined in the “marriage” of unity, but not merged, were if anything maneuvering to maintain—and indeed, to extend—their autonomy and power.”

Pro-Hadi militiamen in Aden. Again, note the flag (AFP/File)

Saleh and al-Bid were fighters, who had won the power they had through brute force and cunning. They had both survived when no one expected them to. Power was as precious as water to them, and when the time came to part with and share even a nominal amount, they balked. Power was *theirs*; they had *earned* it; it was theirs by *right of conquest*. “Against these forces pushing the two Yemens together, a shared culture, the historical dream of union, and the South’s economic needs there were other factors pulling Sana’a and Aden apart,” note Hurd and Noakes, who go on to say that the factors “involved clashes between northern and southern elites, rather than among ordinary people, just as the subsequent civil war was being waged because of the leaders’ interests, not because of any deep animosity felt by the Yemeni people.”

The story of Yemen since unification is one of conflict over power that has since caused a number of problems directly, as well as nurturing others that may have been repressed had unification truly been carried out. Against a Yemen united in spirit as well as in name, it is unlikely that the Houthis would have had the opportunity to overthrow the government, or AQAP the ability to become so influential in the country. Instead of yielding a country well able to stand up to foreign and domestic opponents, as was one of the main impetuses behind unification in the first place, the merger instead created a state whose main purposes are the perpetuation of old grievances and the creation of new ones.

In their contest for power and influence, Saleh and al-Bid, and the GPC and YSP, respectively, with them, failed to build off of the genuinely positive sentiment of the people and become shepherds of a new nation with a new future. They could have gone the path of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness in Northern Ireland, where two old enemies joined in constructive governance, but instead chose to maintain unrealistic expectations that only engendered continuing mistrust and zero-sum thinking.

“The plan to hold direct winner-take-all elections without proportional representation, and no post-election pact beyond vague promises to form a national unity coalition,” Day remarks about the blue-sky thinking about their own chances of victory prevalent among both the GPC and YSP, “fed a sense of competition that magnified social and political divisions.”

One of the main commonalities between Saleh and al-Bid were that they were autocrats ruling undemocratic states, and also “their hostility to a system of multiple parties and liberal democratic institutions.” The power politics of realist theory (not to be too Stephen Walt-ish), in the end, are the most effective way of framing the narrative surrounding the North-South divide’s persistence.

Perhaps unification came too soon; maybe it was too big of a leap too soon. An Oslo-Accords type agreement in reverse, one that would foster trust and cooperation on the road to unification as opposed to separation, may have worked out better. Or a Bosnia and Herzegovina-like federation that decentralized power. Both examples, though, didn't exist as a precedent in 1990, but ideas of a loose federal system or gradual unification were there.

Fred Halliday quotes an official from North Yemen years before unification as saying that "except for some historic accident, unity will only come about over a long period of time…Reunification will not be realized through grandiose discussions, but is more attainable through slowly creating concrete links, beginning modestly with areas such as trade and tourism." For all of the reasons noted before, though, they chose the fast lane to unification, and Yemen has been paying for it ever since.

Note: All sources for this article can be made available upon request to the author's email. For the sake of saving space on an already lengthy piece, the bibliography was omitted.

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