

Yemen's southern question

The political future of South Yemen is a fulcrum point that could decide the fate of the nation, writes Hossam Radman

The Yemeni National Dialogue, which convened in Riyadh from 29 March to 7 April, underscored the essence of the multifaceted Yemeni question: the need to restore the Yemeni nation-state. This had become an almost forgotten duty amidst the diverse agendas playing out in the country.

If the outputs of the dialogue appear to be largely tactical in nature, aimed as they are at paving the way to an end to the hostilities and a roadmap to a political solution to the conflict in the country, they nevertheless reflect the realisation that Yemen is fighting two battles at once: a military one and a battle for identity. It is difficult to separate the two, and no political settlement of the armed conflict can achieve lasting results unless the battle of identity is also resolved. If this does not take place, identity-based ideologies that clash with the nation-state will continue to seethe beneath the surface and jeopardise stability.

This also applies to the regional dimension of the identity question, since it would



be misleading to reduce the Yemeni crisis to the conflict against the north of the country controlled by the Houthi rebels.

The collapse of the regime led by former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2011 precipitated a resurgence of historic rifts, the most obvious being the north-south divide, which today is being articulated by the Houthi Movement in the north harking back to the pre-modern Yemeni Imamate and the Southern Movement in the south harking back to

the former independent state of South Yemen.

This broader context throws into relief a dangerous trend. One of the most frequently heard concerns voiced during the dialogue was that the "Houthi project threatens to erode national identity in Yemen." But it has become all too obvious since the outbreak of the country's Civil War that the concept of a culturally pluralist nation-state has never taken root in Yemen and that this problem is not limited to the Houthis.

The Houthi insurgency was just one of the natural outcomes of the collapse of central authority in Yemen, a dynamic that has had historical precedents in Yemen and elsewhere.

But Yemen faces the unprecedented situation where two projects have re-emerged at once to threaten the reconstitution of a single state: the Houthi revivalist project fighting within the geographical boundaries of the historical Mutawakkilite Imamate in the north and the Southern Move-

ment project in the south, factions of which have taken up the banner of secession and the resurrection of South Yemen.

The battles fought by the Southern Transitional Council (STC), the dominant faction in the Southern Movement, whether against Houthi incursions towards the south or against forces allied with the internationally recognised Yemeni government, confirm this.

However, the Southern aspirations are probably more containable than those of the Houthis in the north, given the Riyadh Agreement signed between the STC and the Yemeni government in 2019 and one of the outputs of this month's dialogue making the STC one of the main components of the new Yemeni Presidential Council that has replaced the government of former president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

The Houthis defeated the Salafis in Yemen at the battle of Dammaj in 2013, and they defeated the Muslim Brotherhood in the north when they staged their coup in Septem-

After Benghazi

Khalifa Haftar's declaration over Benghazi may open space of more implacable conflicts to resurface on the Libyan political scene, writes Kamel Abdallah

The armed forces led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar announced a "great victory" against Islamist militants in Libya's second city of Benghazi on Thursday. "We now have total control of the Qawarsha sector," 10 kilometres (six miles) west of the centre of Benghazi, said Ahmad Mesmari, spokesman for Haftar's forces.

Mesmari hailed what he termed a "great victory" in what had been a stronghold of Ansar al-Sharia, a group close to Al-Qaeda that is classified as a terrorist group by the United Nations and United States.

Haftar's forces, called the Libyan National Army, were pursuing the Islamist militants in Qanfouda, further west, one of the last remaining sectors held by Islamist militants of the Mediterranean city.

He did not give a casualty toll for the fighting but a military source said Wednesday that 12 of Haftar's soldiers had been killed in clashes since Tuesday.

Thirteen "extremists" died in three days of battle, according to another spokesman for Haftar's forces, Ali al-Thabet, but there was no indepen-

dent confirmation of that toll.

The US envoy to Libya, Jonathan Win-er, on Thursday issued a rare show of support for the forces of Haftar, a controversial and divisive figure in Libya.

"Tough sacrifices by #Libya National Army soldiers this week reported - 20 killed & 40 injured in counter terror fighting in Benghazi," he wrote on Twitter.

Benghazi, birthplace of the 2011 revolution which toppled Libya's longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi, has been the scene of daily clashes for the past two years between Haftar's forces and

Islamist militias holding onto pockets of the city.

Five years after the revolution, the country is embroiled in violence and run by two rival administrations.

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