

Civil War in Yemen¹

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Secession, Oil and the Crucial Role of Saudi Arabia

The world will have to get used to the re-division of Yemen, although it is far from clear that the reborn South Yemeni state will be able to secure all the territory occupied or claimed by its Marxist predecessor. If the new southern secessionist forces can make their independence stick, they will, naturally, lay claim to all the territory formerly considered by the authorities in Aden to belong to South Yemen. But they will come under pressure from the Saudis over the border issue whilst remaining under pressure from northern forces, which currently control the Shabwa region.

The civil war in Yemen has now caused the irrevocable breakup of the Arab world's most important experiment in political unification. What is far from clear is whether the breakaway southern forces owing loyalty to the government proclaimed by former Yemeni Vice President Ali Salem al-Beidh, will succeed in establishing control over all or most of the territories which the last governments of independent South Yemen considered to be theirs by right.

The North Threatens the Fields...

The breakaway state faces two major problems in securing control over the territories to which it believes it is entitled. The first is the military threat posed by Northern forces.

Northern patrols are reported to have reached the Indian Ocean, seizing the oil pipeline outlet at Bir Ali. In itself, this may have little immediate strategic significance. Bir Ali serves the pipeline from Nimr's concession at Shabwa, and output through the line is a mere 5,000 b/d as a result of persistent problems in developing a field that was once thought to be a major pillar of oil development in Southern Yemen. But the

export terminal is no more than 80 miles (130km) from the much more important export terminal of Ash Shihr, which serves Canadian Occidental's 150,000 b/d output from the Masilah field in the Hadhramaut.

At this stage, with the situation fluid and with supply lines strained, it may be reading too much to assume that this northern foray to the coast has automatically severed the land links between the Hadhramaut and the southern capital at Aden. Al-Beidh and his new government have, however, indicated that *in extremis* they would remove their government from Aden and re-establish it in the Hadhramaut.

...But Oil Continues to Flow

Meanwhile, as of mid-June, Yemen's oil output was continuing to flow. The north remains in firm control of the original Marib field developed by Hunt and Exxon, which produces around 190,000 b/d, while the south holds on to Can-Oxy's field at Masilah and the new fields which other Western companies, notably France's Total, were hoping to bring on line soon that are near Masilah. Crude from Masilah is also still reported to be reaching Aden by sea.

While international mediators sought to get negotiations going in Cairo towards the end of June, northern forces were engaged in shelling Aden, but it appears that having held on for more than a month, the south will be able to hold its capital. However, although oil installations have generally not been targeted so far, the refinery at Aden must definitely be considered at risk.

The north's initial successes could prove hard to reverse in key areas along the old north-south border. Northern forces hold the Shabwa area, giving them control of both the concessions

operated by the Saudi Nimr Petroleum Company and the joint concession in the former debateable land that separated the old North Yemen from South Yemen. Ironically, it was the decision taken by Sanaa and Aden in the late 1980s to develop this small zone jointly that led to the degree of trust between the two sides that was to result in the 24 May 1990 unification of the two countries.

The Concerns of the Saudis

Saudi Arabia's role in the contract is likely to prove crucial. The Kingdom was unhappy about the unification of Yemen, since this meant the potential emergence of a country with a similar population to its own (in terms of indigenous inhabitants), with a useful energy potential that could enable it to achieve sustained economic development, and with an apparent commitment to a political and social system that was more geared to Western ideals of democracy and social change than to Arabian traditionalism.

The Saudi fears were misplaced, not least because of the consequences of the Kingdom's own action in expelling some 840,000 Yemeni workers and their dependants during the Kuwait crisis, the price paid for Yemen's efforts to take a middle of the road approach instead of full outright support for the line taken by Saudi Arabia and the United States.

This, and the drying up of economic links with the rest of the GCC, prompted four years of recession. At the same time, the Yemeni authorities themselves made little or no progress in terms of practical unification of administration or security.

Unification Without Unity

In effect, two separate states continued in existence, owing allegiance to one single legal authority. The 1993 elections should have led to the consolidation of the legal, if nominal, unity already established. In fact, they fractured the country further by showing how traditional many parts of the north remained and how important was the rising power of the forces of

political Islam, represented by the *Islah* movement in the north.

The south, with its strange legacy of secularism derived from both British colonial administration in Aden and Marxist government throughout the whole of the south, including its traditional tribal hinterland, was better placed to resist *Islah's* blandishments. But southern leaders, who believed they represented a modernising tendency in Yemeni affairs, felt under threat, as the north, which has three to four times as many people as the south, appeared to be ever more devoted to traditional and Islamist politics.

The contrast can be overstressed. The Hadhramaut and the outlying regions of the south are just as tribal as many regions of the north: it is the governing tradition that is different.

Does Riyadh Want One State or Two?

The question now is whether Saudi Arabia would prefer to see a unified Yemen that was dependent on the Kingdom, or a reversion to the *status quo ante*, the existence of two Yemeni states which, because they are at odds with each other, do not pose a threat, either politically, socially or militarily, to the Kingdom.

It was no coincidence that one of the first actions that the northern authorities took after the south seceded on 24 May - the fourth anniversary of unification - was the appointment of a new oil minister in Sanaa. This is Faisal bin Shamlan, who was formerly Nimr's Vice President for Yemeni Affairs, and thus an expert on Saudi-Yemeni relations, most notably in the area of oil. Sanaa, of course, continues to argue that its ministers constitute the government of United Yemen, and not simply of a revived North Yemen.

Gulf Attitudes Towards the Conflict

Shamlan's appointment is certainly a gesture towards the Saudis. Whether it is sufficient will take some time to ascertain. Sanaa has been backed in the current conflict by Iraq, which is

not likely to endear it to Riyadh. At the same time, some of Riyadh's colleagues in the GCC, most notably the UAE and Kuwait, have intimated their sympathy for the south. In the past, the Kingdom is believed to have favoured the secession of at least the Hadhramaut from United Yemen.

Reports to this effect circulated two years ago when the Saudis unexpectedly issued warning letters to a number of oil companies, who were drilling in accordance with concessions awarded by the Yemeni authorities, that they should cease their operations since they were drilling in territory claimed by Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis have been worried about the growth of political Islam in the region, and may thus be inclined to cooperate with the South Yemeni authorities, particularly if they can use such cooperation to secure a final settlement of the border between any revived South Yemeni state and Saudi Arabia.

This could entail the substantial loss to the South Yemenis of territories that Aden had long regarded as its own, even though the boundaries between the two countries have never been agreed by both Aden and Riyadh.

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