Ending the War by Coming to Terms with Yemen’s Political History

While Saudi Arabia sits only days away from a political agreement with Yemen’s STC forces (Southern Transitional Council) in its bid to salvage Abdo Rabbo Mansour Hadi’s presidential claim over an increasingly divided nation, such headways remain symptomatic of Yemen’s unravelling. And though many will see in the move proof that Yemen’s conundrum is in fact solvable, we ought to remember that solving the puzzle that is Yemen’s southern provinces is but one stone of the fallen edifice of the Republic of Yemen.

For Yemen’s war to become a distant memory, Yemen will need to be made whole again - its sovereignty and the potency of its institutions will have to be reaffirmed and most important of all its people will need to trust in the rule of the law.

Broken up along tribal, religious, and political lines Yemen finds itself caught in the most traumatic identity crisis of its history - a history it needs to be said which stretches several centuries if not millenia. It is balance and continuity that Yemen craves most of all, and such continuity can only be found inwards, by returning the embattled-nation to those social and political markers it knows best.

Yemen’s failures one can argue are not as much its own than that of its foreign meddlers, if anything for a lack of a cohesive socio-political vision coupled with a propensity to ignore its idiosyncrasies. Yemen is only a failed state for many tried to reinvent its institutions while denying its identity.

Once upon a time Yemen was looked upon by its neighbours as both a strategic partner and a necessary ally by virtue of its geography. With its thousands of miles of waterways looking on several continents and the ability to sit an agricultural regional powerhouse, Yemen holds many promises of growth, opportunities, and strength amid fast changing geopolitical alliances and the rise of an increasingly competitive Asian Block.

Yemen, should all actors choose to envision it, could be restored back to its initial roles - that of a commercial pathway and a gatekeeper to Gulf countries security and stability.

And yet, today, Yemen has become a thing of nightmares - fractured, battered, starved and diseased ... Yemen has also learnt, courtesy of certain actors' war games, to wield sectarianism as a weapon.

Again, it needs not be so should all players choose to apply themselves to rational pragmatism - the same pragmatism which prompted the UAE for example to disengage its troops from South Yemen and instead promote local actors to support overtures towards peace. And though such overtures may not have been welcomed by all - such is the nature of the game, a return to political pluralism will offer much needed respite at a time of heightened military tensions.

The use of brutal force in Yemen will only serve to further entrench factions in their own hyperbolic militantism, thus denying Yemenis not only a future but the right to fair political representation. To scream democracy at the point of a sword while denying communities the right to disagree on the basis of political dogmatism is not a manifesto ... it is however the bedrock of totalitarianism.

It would serve us well to remember that Saudi Arabia’s involvement in Yemen largely predates the war, late President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime and even the Republic itself.

Riyadh’s involvement in Yemen came on the back 1962 Revolution, when the kingdom attempted to defeat the
advances of Egypt’s republican adventures south of its borders by squarely aligning itself with Yemen’s Zaydi Imamate.

From that moment on Saudi Arabia became invested in Yemen’s future, a reality we must grasp will unlikely change. This is not to say that Yemen should bow in retreat, only that it will have to contend with its rich neighbour’s ambitions and needs to chart its own waters.

If France and Germany could find a way to heal centuries of enmity and two world wars to reinvent themselves Europe’s powerhouses so too can Yemen and Saudi Arabia - all to the betterment of both their people.

As late Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz reportedly stressed in 2007 “Yemen’s security is inseparable from Saudi Arabia’s security.” Such a statement implies causality. Beyond that, proof that Riyadh’s interests in Yemen need not be defined in belligerence and that in actuality Yemen’s unrest would only translate in the destabilisation of the kingdom - putting the onus on the kingdom to support a strong Yemen.

The Houthis’ latest intrusions onto Saudi Arabia’s southwestern province of Najran and the attack on Aramco this September made that point abundantly clear. Peace in Yemen is an issue of national security for both Riyadh and Sana’a. To contemplate further escalation can only lead to mutual destruction.

Back when Saudi Arabia wielded its riches to sponsor Yemen’s political future, the nation enjoyed some degree of stability, insofar as Riyadh’s patronage played into Yemen’s intricated mesh of tribal alliances, military officials’ ambitions and the rise of political factions opposed to the then-status quo.

Al-Ahmar’s family is a perfect example of such patronage. Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, the then head of Yemen’s Hashid tribal confederation (one of the most powerful and populous tribes in northern Yemen) enjoyed both the status of Sheikh and Speaker of Parliament between 1993 and his death in 2007. Over the decades Al Ahmar clan amassed immense wealth through Riyadh’s generous stipends, notwithstanding the political powers the family asserted as proxies of Riyadh via Al Islah party - the only real opposition to President Saleh’s political faction: the General People’s Congress.

As the new millennium rolled in Yemen’s balance was challenged by two cataclysmic events - which events we need to note far predate the arrival of the Houthis onto the political scene.

In 2005 Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz, who for a decade had overviewed Saudi Arabia’s Yemen’s Affairs Committee retired from power due to ill-health and in 2007 Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar died leaving behind but division through his sons’ contradicting ambitions.

From that point on whatever socio-political stability Yemen had enjoyed came undone. We are witnessing the final throes of this undoing. This is not to say that Yemen was idyllic, far from it ... if anything Yemen was stuck in nepotism hell, unable to commit to any meaningful social reforms or modernism. But for all its ills Yemen was at peace.

Unless we learn to come to terms with what led us here, it is unlikely Yemen will move to safer shores. It would be folly too, to lock Yemen in a cycle of retribution for past offenses ... a man who seeks revenge as the saying goes should dig two graves.

Yemen’s descent began long before late March 2015; the fractures that now lay bare before us were brought to life over decades of dividing policies for a lack of a unifying vision.

More than peace maybe Yemen needs to reinvent itself away from the ills imposed on its people - in this equation the nation’s tribal make-up could prove a powerful tool, a mean to enact not only political self-determination through local representation but peace through tribal mediation.

This of course would send Yemen towards federalization and ideally the consolidation of its democratic institution. Change needs to be incremental not brutal.

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