Brokering Peace in Yemen - Fight for Marib will Dictate Nation’s Future

Yemen’s oil rich province of Marib is once again centre stage to a raging battle for control, pitting Yemen’s internationally recognised government (backed by the Saudi war coalition and its local allies) to Ansarallah (aka the Houthis), a movement born in the Highlands of the northern province of Sa’ada that operates under the leadership of Abdel-Malik al Houthi - a man now made infamous for his rejection of Saudi Arabia’s hegemony.

Since late March 2015 Yemen, the poorest nation of the Arabian Peninsula has suffered under the fires of war; a war born in Riyadh’s corridors of power, to halt Iran’s perceived imperialistic ambitions over a region which for decades had known but one master and one house - that of Al Saud. Six years on and Yemen’s rebels have held strong, powered by an ideological machine that has proven if not effective at uniting the country under its banner, resilient in its rejection of Saudi Arabia’s political diktat.

But Yemen’s war is unlikely to last for much longer. Beyond the strongest of political wills and all the lead military superpowers have gathered against Yemen, the country has gone so far beyond its breaking point that for all parties involved peace remains the only viable option - if indeed survival is what each party strives for. To fight any longer, to ask any more of a population deprived of food, medicine and shelter, would equate to an act of genocide.

Yemen’s future is being played out in Marib. Ironically enough, this war is set to end pretty much where it started, as
following their grab over the capital, Sana’a in late 2014, the Houthis sent many of their fighters to the oil-rich province to secure what they knew was North Yemen’s beating economic heart. Without Marib, no government in the North - especially if cut out for South Yemen’s natural resources, can claim economic viability.

The last bastion of Yemen’s government in North Yemen, Marib is the one prize no faction wants to let go of or abandon. Home to a majority Sunni population, the province is very much a religious enclave Saudi Arabia and its partners do not want to lose control over by fear it would embolden the so-called “Shia world”, and ultimately feed a religious insurrection the Kingdom wishes to avoid at all cost. Stuck in a narrative of old, Yemen has been reduced to a religious claim to rationalise very worldly ambitions.

In the past few days the province has seen fighting resume with an intensity, and one might add desperation reminiscent of the early days of this war - a vital military and economic flashpoint, Marib holds the fate of an entire nation within its hands.

The fighting over the last week killed 29 pro-government personnel and at least 82 rebels, AFP reported. Whichever party will come to claim control will most likely stand triumphant as peace talks will resume.

And though the United Nations appear to have given up on Yemen - outgoing UN envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths told the Security Council earlier in June that his efforts over the past three years to end the war had been “in vain”, it is clear that today’s fight reflects a desire by both sides to end a conflict none can fully win, but all need to contain for risks of permanent socio-political fractures.

However counter-intuitive it may sound, the battle for Marib will determine peace in the war-torn nation - a peace which so far has eluded a people exhausted by famine, violence, diseases and overall hopelessness. But at what cost? About 80% of Yemen’s total population sits on the brink of famine, a reality most observers fail to grasp when pondering over the future of the region.

Yemen’s war has gone too far and has lasted too long for anyone to imagine that a brokered-peace will heal what came undone.

Marib today is home to over one million IDPs (Internally Displaced People), which people find themselves once again caught in a battle they did not provoked, called for, or even supported in any way. Pawns in this game of thrones, millions stand to lose their lives, a tragedy no parties seem to grasp, let alone care about.

In this pursuit of power, no faction can claim higher ground - all are guilty of atrocities historians will have a hard time leaving out, even for the sake of appearances.

If Saudi Arabia has indiscriminately used its drones to rain death and panic in Houthi-controlled territories so that its ground troops would benefit from a much needed edge, the Houthis have relentlessly targeted IDP camps manned by the ‘enemy’ as retaliatory measures.

Civilians are now ‘fair game’ of war under the developing narrative.

So much so indeed that all parties have been keen to rely on a steady supply of child soldiers to feed their respective war efforts - recruiting teenagers to the tune of their respective religious and political rhetoric so new units could be moulded to their doctrines. Needless to say that such ‘tactics’ however necessary they may seem to those on the grounds, will carry unforeseen consequences long after guns have been silenced. Worse, we could soon see rise in Yemen a new brand of radicalism, one forged in trauma and fast-paced religious indoctrination.

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