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Review paper

THE POLITICS AND SOCIETY OF SOUTH ARABIA – A DREAM THAT TURNED INTO A NIGHTMARISH REALITY

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Abstract: In its broadest sense, this paper deals with the socio-political situation in one of the World's most fragile and unstable states – Yemen. The first part of the paper gives a review of the socio-political situation in the pre-unification period, with a focus on the explanation of some regional differences in this highly fragmented society. The second part deals with the difficulties of the post-unification period during which tensions in Yemen gradually grew and eventually led to a full-scale war that started in 2015. The third part is a review of the situation from the start of the political turmoil until the present day.

Yemen is the least known of all Arab states and the situation in it is often misunderstood or oversimplified. For this reason, the goal of this paper is to shed light on the entangled Yemeni socio-political dynamics in order to help the understanding of the present political context in this country.

Keywords: Yemen, PDRY, YAR, unity, war, history, society, politics.

INTRODUCTION

In these times of increased political tensions and instability, challenges for World's security are numerous. Problems with terrorism, growing tensions between the United States and Russia, concerns about North Korea's nuclear program, etc. are all undoubtedly very important issues, but at the same time, a shadow is undeservingly cast over some huge problems in other parts of the planet. One of these chronically neglected areas is Yemen, which has been dealing with a disastrous war that led to a catastrophic security and humanitarian situation in this region.

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United in 1990, for the first time in its history, Yemen is still struggling to create and maintain at least some sort of political stability. Earlier in history, the unification of South Arabia was considered an unfulfilled dream of Yemeni people. Culturally, politically, religiously, geographically and in many other ways divided, people from this part of the World consider themselves to be the descendants of Qahtān, or South Arabians, which makes them a distinct ethnic group from other Arabs. Yet, in spite of the fact that South Arabia was a home to some very powerful kingdoms, it has never been willingly united. Never, until the new winds of World's politics gave Yemenis this opportunity in 1990. Unfortunately, the problems started to show from the very first day and, with some ups and downs, this newly formed Republic gradually slid into a chaos which turned Yemen into some of the world's most fragile and failed states, along with Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and the Central African Republic (library.fundforpeace.org, 2016).

In this paper, I intend to review Yemen's highly heterogeneous society and deal with the failure of the unification process in the early nineties and gradual growth of the tensions between different political actors. Ultimately, I will analyse the actual political situation in Yemen, review its prospects for resolving the crisis and challenge the idea of unity.

THE FRAGMENTED NATURE OF YEMENI SOCIETY

Although making a single, separate, ethnic group, South Arabians were never actually united. Until the early 20th century, even the communication was difficult in this region, due to Yemen's unusual topography. For example, the most populous part of the country, which stretches from the border with Saudi Arabia to the Gulf of Aden, is covered by very high mountain ranges with its peaks reaching altitudes well over 3000m. Further to the east, we have a vast and extremely hot desert with a fertile valley Wādī Hadramawt, which is another regional centre of South Arabian culture, situated in the middle of it.

Also, there is a number of local cultural specificities that influence the socio-political sphere in today's Yemen. For example, north-western parts of Yemen are home to *Zaydiyya*, a third largest branch of Shia Islam. With a population of between 8 and 10 million people (rough estimation), it is the only significant Zaydi population in the World. Being doctrinally closer to Sunni Islam than other Shia branches, Zaydi Islam has itself never been a cause for religious tensions, but it did help create a very specific local society. Founded in the 8th century by Zayd ibn 'Alī (698 – 740), Zaydi Islam found its way to Yemen in the following century, when it was brought there by Yahyá ibn al-Husayn, after being invited to arbitrate between the local tribes. There, he took the title Hādī ilá al-Haqq and formed a branch of Zaydi Islam that is called after him al-Hādawiyya. It was adopted by tribal sheikhs in the highlands and perfectly blended with the mentality of the

tribes (Gagić, 2016, p. 389). Knowing about the nature of Zaydi Islam is very important for understanding the socio-political situation of Yemen and its inner instability and one of the key things is the fact that they had their own state (at times there was more than one) from 897 to 1962. Although it had an imam as a ruler², it relied on the protection of the tribes who used their power to maintain a stable influential role in the society throughout centuries. Yemeni tribes, particularly the ones from the northern parts of the country, are still very influential, they possess a great amount of light, mid and even heavy weapons, which is often regarded as a certain obstacle for creating a stable modern country, due to their habit to challenge the central authority of the state.³

The situation in the rest of South Arabia was much different since it was home to many different political entities, and at the moment of liberation of southern and eastern parts of Yemen from British occupation, there were more than twenty separate sultanates, emirates and shaykhdoms (Day, 2012, p. 59) that needed to be united. It is important to notice that the British until 1953 never tried to impose unified government over the colonised territories in Yemen, except in Aden, which was in their focus while the rest remained relatively independent. Still, their firm presence in Aden, which has one of the best natural ports in the World, contributed to its development into the most liberal city in the Peninsula. Immediately after independence, in June 1969 the Marxist political stream took control of the country, renaming it to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). Among the consequences of these developments was the creation of a secular society, led by a strong ruling apparatus which banned some of the traditional customs such as carrying weapons and revenge killings. All of this remained virtually unknown to the North where parts of the country are still ruled by the tribal customary laws. These evident differences were among the main causes for the concerns of the southerners about the idea of unity. In 1995, Michael Hudson wrote about the statement of Haydar al-Attās, a first prime minister of the Republic of Yemen, who allegedly said that the Socialist Party would have difficulties to expand the southern system to the anarchy in the north (Day, 2012, p. 123). Haydar himself later confirmed saying this in an interview for al-Jazeera (aljazeera.net, 2009) and unfortunately his concerns were well founded.

² One of the main differences between Zaydi Islam and the most widespread branch of Shia Islam, the Twelver Shia, is nonexistence of the hidden imam. In Zaydi Shia, any descendant of Muhammad can be an imam and serve as a ruler.

³ It is even present in Zaydiyya doctrine, since one of the key pillars of Zaydi Islam is the doctrine of *kburiyy* which allows them to raise an armed rebellion against a ruler that they consider to be a tyrant. More on Yemeni tribes in the works of Dresch, Weir and Caton.

TWO REPUBLICS – TWO SYSTEMS

Inspired by Arab nationalism, with its centre in Egypt, the ideas of Yemeni unification started taking shape in the 1950s. After the creation of the PDRY and the YAR at the end of the 1960s, it became more realistic but Yemenis waited until 22 May 1990. Having in mind that the PDRY had to resolve their own divisions and first create a strong country themselves, as well as the fact that the early years of YAR were also very turbulent, with assassinations of presidents being a rule rather than an exception, it made sense that two newly formed countries could not just jump into unification. However, during the next 20 years, the differences between the PDRY and YAR continued to grow. Firstly, the Marxist regime in the PDRY created a strong one-party system, which was highly centralized and was very important for maintaining the cross-regional balance in the country (Day, 2012, p. 81) with government representatives in most regions being people native to those regions. This practice was virtually unknown to the northern parts of the country.

During the Republican revolution in northern Yemen, one of the issues that were discussed was the position of the tribes in the newly-formed Republic. There were two streams with completely different points of view. According to the first group, the tribes only care about their own social and political status and are chronically unaware of how important is the creation of a political system and a country led by the rule of law. This stream argued that the tribes should be under a strong control of the country, similar to the situation during the rule of the last two imams from the Hamīd al-Dīn dynasty (1904 – 1962), which was highly oppressive towards the tribes. But the other side claimed that the tribes had suffered a lot during those decades and that they would be prepared to accept the formation of a central government, under the condition that they were treated fairly (Al-Shajrabī, 2009, p. 33-34). The second opinion was accepted, and in following decades the YAR was ruled by tribal elites from its northern territories (particularly Hāshid tribes).

Political developments in the YAR during the seventies, particularly the ones concerning the presidential position, speak a lot about the tribal influence in this country. Between 1974 and 1978, three presidents were forcibly removed from the office. The first one, ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Iryānī was removed in a bloodless coup in 1974, but the other two, Ibrahim al-Hamdī and Ahmad al-Ghashmī were both killed in 1977 and 1978 respectively. All these presidents, including the newly elected one, ‘Alī ‘Abdullah Sālīh were appointed and removed by the will of the tribal sheikhs from Hāshid and Bakīl⁴ confederations.

So, what did actually make the PDRY enter a union with politically such a different country? A major political disorder inside Yemen’s Socialist Party

⁴ Bakīl is the largest tribal confederation and at that time was the second strongest one, after Hāshid.

culminated in a 12-day long war in Aden in 1986. At that time the president of PDRY was ‘Alī Nāsir Muhammad whose security forces launched an attack inside the YSP Politburo meeting. Four key members were killed with ‘Alī Sālīm al-Bīd being the only survivor (Day, 2012, p. 73-75). Heavy clashes were started and a horrible destruction was inflicted upon Aden. The result was the removal of ‘Alī Nāsir Muhammad, whose place was taken by ‘Alī Sālīm al-Bīd, but the consequences were so big that the system could not be restored. Also, towards the end of the Cold War, Soviet support decreased and the PDRY faced severe economic and security problems by the end of the eighties. At the same time, powered by the 1984 oil discovery and mostly Saudi (and the United States) support for Islamic fundamentalist currents in Yemen, Sālīh finally managed to stabilize his authority. The mentioned spreading of Sunni fundamentalism and, actually, extremism, which had never been a part of Yemeni tradition, will have a huge impact on the political situation after the unification⁵.

In any case, the differences between the two countries were obvious and surely bigger than they had been twenty years prior to the unification, but at that particular moment the PDRY’s economy was shaken and its security was fragile, so forming the united country seemed like a good idea and a potential way out of the crisis.

THE SONS OF QAHTĀN UNITED

This unification was a long-awaited one. Although the two parts of South Arabia became republics approximately at the same time, they postponed the process of the unification because of their differences and local issues. But then, when another opportunity arose, they hastened into it, without much negotiation, in spite of the obstacles that everybody was aware of. Whether it was the oil discovery in a border region, or the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the mix of these and other reasons, both the PDRY President ‘Alī Sālīm al-Bīd and the YAR President ‘Alī ‘Abdullah Sālīh opted for a quick unification, agreeing that some issues would be resolved along the way.

Some things were not so difficult to agree. For example, it was agreed that twenty ministers should be from the north and nineteen from the south, with the prime minister being a southerner Haydar al-‘Attās. The deputy ministers came from the region opposite from the region the minister came from. “The best practices” from the two completely different systems were left to be decided upon later, but the years passed and nothing happened. Instead, this situation was used to turn some things in Sālīh’s favour. For example, the Ministry of Finance was ‘Alawī al-Salāmī, a member of Sālīh’s party the General People’s Congress. Being in charge of the salaries for all government officials he was forced to work before the

⁵ More on Salafism in Yemen in: Salmoni, B., Loidolt, B., Wells, (2010) and Bonnefoy, (2011).

administrative practice was determined. Naturally, he went for the old YAR practice, thus eliminating the PDRY accounting institutions, although their practice was far more advanced (Day, 2012, p. 111).

Another, more vivid and more violent example is the series of assassinations or attempted assassinations of southern political figures, most of whom were the members of YSP. They started in 1991 and until the end of 1992 the number of violent attacks, many of which, with a deadly outcome, reached one hundred. It is needless to say that this was a clear proof of an immense hostility towards the Socialist Party. It is also very important to notice the further development of good relations between ‘Alī ‘Abdullah Sālih and the Sunni extremist groups. The spread of radical Salafi influence started in the eighties and was supported by the Saudis. Also, similarly to Afghanistan, the U.S. administration did not hesitate to provide help for the militant Islamic fundamentalist groups in Yemen in order to hinder the spreading of Soviet influence in the region. These extremists, particularly the followers of Muqbil ibn Hādī al-Wadī whose Salafi centre Dār al-Hadīth was the most influential one in Yemen, played a big role in aggression towards the YSP, labelling them as infidels and enemies of Yemen’s unity.

The foundations of the idea of unity were obviously shaky from the very beginning, but the process of implementation showed that it was probably ill-conceived and that the real political transition based on a dialogue between two previously sovereign states was never in Sālih’s plans. One of the points the two sides did agree on was establishing of a multi-party system with the Parliament being elected in free elections, which was probably one of the main reasons for the hostility towards the YSP since they were surely regarded as the most serious political threat to the north’s hegemonic ambitions.

As for the society itself, it also remained deeply fragmented, which was shown in the first parliamentary elections that were held in Yemen in April 1993. The two sides opted for a simple majority electoral system where a single candidate was chosen from each of 301 electoral units out of which 245 were in the regions that previously belonged to the YAR since the north indeed had much larger population. Sālih’s GPC did win the elections with around 40% of the votes, a new Islamist party Islāh came second, which was probably the biggest surprise of the elections and the YSP came third with around 18%. However, what is maybe more important is the fact that the GPC actually won only in the northern and western provinces (such as capital San‘ā’, Sa‘da, Hudayda etc.). In the midland regions such as Ta‘iz, Islāh did great and actually won the most seats in this important region. However, the most interesting are the results from the southern provinces where the GPC won only 3 seats out of 56, Islāh did not win a single seat, while the YSP’s candidates came victorious in 41 electoral units. The YSP had 43 candidates in the south, which means that only two of them actually lost, and the ones that won mostly did so in a very convincing manner (Day, 2012, p. 117 – 122).

A coalition government between the GPC, Islāh and YSP with a five-member presidential council was supposed to be created. Since the GPC did win by far the most seats, they insisted on having 3 members in it while the other two would be shared between Islāh and the YSP. However, due to the convincing victory in the southern provinces, the YSP demanded that they share 4 seats with the GPC, claiming that they represent a half of the country. The presidential council was finally formed on 11 October 1993, according to the southerners' demands, but they insisted on pushing the other demands for reforms. 'Alī Sālīm al-Bīd started giving statements about him being concerned about Yemen's unity, and in general, the YSP officials started suggesting the federalization of the country, splitting it into two entities. Of course, they were accused by the Sālīh and his Islamist partners from Islāh of plotting the secession and from this point the situation could only go one way. Some further negotiations did take place, but even back then nobody seemed to believe that they could end in success.⁶

The war was swiftly won by the north whose army overrun the south in several months. It lasted until 7 July and marked the definite beginning of northern hegemony with Sālīh's patronage system, which relied on heavy corruption, on top. It is worth mentioning again the Sunni extremists, followers of Muqbil ibn Hādī al-Wādīfī, as well as the former jihadists from Afghanistan that were given asylum in Yemen in exchange for the support on the battlefield. They played an important role in Sālīh's victory, and some even claim that their role was a decisive one (Haykel, 2002, p. 30). In any case, it could be argued that in 1994 the dream of Yemen as a voluntarily unified country was already over. Yes, the Republic of Yemen did continue to exist and still officially exists, but this unity is not based on something that all sides agreed upon.

MULTIPLICATION OF PROBLEMS

Salafis with extremist ideas and other Sunni extremists continued to live safely in Yemen during the nineties which would backfire on Yemen's security on the turn of the 21st century. Meanwhile, a political factor with completely different views developed in the border region with Saudi Arabia. Partially due to the fact that Zaydi community fell into an identity crisis after the Republican revolution that overthrown the Imamate, but partially as a response to the strengthening of Salafism in its own courtyard in Dammāj (it is where Muqbil's Dār al-Hadīth was located) in Sa'da Governorate, formation of Zaydi revivalist groups was to be expected in Yemen. After unification and introduction of party pluralism, there was an attempt

⁶ Whether the south was actually plotting the secession was never proven. The secession of the south was announced, but only on 21 May 1994 which was almost a month after the Civil War started (27 April).

to give Zaydi community a political party that would protect their interests, so the first Zaydi party was formed. It was named Hizb al-Haqq, but this experiment failed since this party made a series of political compromises such as the denouncement of Imamate and rejection of some important Zaydi practices.⁷ In addition to this, violent developments that dragged the country into the Civil War, in which Sunni extremists played a prominent role, only accelerated the development of a new Zaydi group that would become one of the key political players on the Yemeni chaotic scene.

Once a member of Hizb al-Haqq, Husayn Badreddin al-Hūthī was among the ones who distanced themselves from this party for ideological reasons. In the mid-nineties he left Yemen and spent some time in Syria and Iran, where he got inspired by Iranian political and economic system. When he returned, after some time, he formed an organization called The Believing Youth (*al-Shabāb al-Mu'min*).⁸ The radicalization of this movement coincided with other developments on Yemeni (and global) political scene in the early 2000s. As an announcement for the following turbulent period, a terrorist attack happened in Aden port on 12 October 2000. On that occasion the USS Cole naval vessel was a target of a suicide bombing in which seventeen American sailors were killed. Ali's regime, being very close to the extremists who lived in Yemen and who, among other things, organized the terrorist attack on the USS Cole⁹, started facing problems because of these connections. When he was strengthening his ties with the extremists, particularly in the early nineties, Ali must have calculated in the possible problems these ties might cause, but he probably also miscalculated his capabilities to deal with them. After the USS Cole bombing, Ali came under serious pressure to cooperate with the United States Government but somehow managed to avoid direct involvement. When the 11 September suicide attacks happened, Ali had no choice but to enter the "War on Terror". At this moment he had to betray many of his old allies in order to prevent a potential American military intervention. He started with arrests, deportations and assassinations and also allowed the US Army to perform the drone attacks against the terrorists. Since then, extremists have been very active, mostly against the Yemeni Army and particularly in the southern provinces of Abyan, La'ij, Shabwa, parts of al-Ramawt, but also in the northern provinces of Ma'rib and al-Jawf, while there have been some deadly attacks in the capital city as well. Occasionally, they are in control of some parts of the Yemeni territory and have been responsible for many deadly attacks throughout the country.

⁷ Such as *kburij*, which is mentioned in the footnote 2.

⁸ More on this in the works of Ahmad Dagshī, (2010, 2012)

⁹ According to some sources a high ranking officer of Yemeni Army General 'Al Mu'sin al-Amar was connected to the USS Cole bombing (Day, 2012, p. 195 – 198).

However, Sunni extremists were not the only side dissatisfied with the newly established cooperation between Yemen and the United States. Only several months after the 11 September attacks, in early 2002 the former of the Believing Youth usayn Badreddin al-th started giving public lectures and speeches directed mostly against the United States and Israel, but also against Salafism while criticizing Zaydi Islam and praising Hezbollah and Iran for their wish to confront the enemies of Islam (Gagić, 2016, p.208). Over time his speeches became more fiery and aggressive, which provoked a reaction from the Government who opted for heavy repressive measures in order to try to stop the development of this potentially rebellious and militant group. usayn himself was killed in the beginning of military actions in 2004, but his martyrdom only inspired the ths to persist in their fight. Between 2004 and 2009 a series of military actions were taken and resulted in thousands of deaths, hundreds of thousands of refugees and a humanitarian catastrophe. However, it is also important to notice that since 2004 a‘da Governorate has been firmly in ths hands and still is among the territories of Yemen that are controlled by their self-proclaimed executive body called the Supreme Political Council (*Al-Majlis al-Siyāsī al-‘lā*) which was formed by the th leadership and the GPC, the party of the former President ‘Alī ‘Abdullah ^{li}.

So, since the beginning of the 21st century, Yemen has had to deal with increased security and economic problems from multiple sides. As for the southern parts of the country, political unrest grew bigger and led to the formation of separatist groups such as al-Hirāk, a movement created in 2007 by the retired army officers. They basically criticised the regime for widespread corruption, the failure of democratic mechanisms and hegemonic politics towards the south. Or as one political refugee from al-Mukalla, a ramawt, put it, “they wanted a modern civil society, free from corruption and tribalism”.¹⁰ The change of balance in favour of the north after 1994 is certainly one of the main causes of instability and since then ^{li} has been exploiting the South and creating the resentments that fed the growth of Hirāk (Brehony, 2016, p. 137).

On top of all that the corruption was rampant and the life in Yemen started becoming more and more difficult and particularly worrying were obvious signs of water scarcity.¹¹ The tension grew and in 2009 it could be heard from Yemenis that political unrest could be expected. The interviewed Yemenis hoped for political changes, but at the same time were worried about the deterioration of the economic and security situation in the country. Moreover, most of them did not think that ^{li} had intentions to provide the opposition, now united under the name Joint Meeting Parties (*A z b al-Liqā’ al-Mushtarak*, formed in 2005), with an opportunity

¹⁰ The interview was performed in Belgrade in February 2015.

¹¹ Upon my arrival in Yemen in January 2009 I was informed in-written that the country is facing a severe water crisis and people are asked to try to save water.

to compete for power in fair elections. Instead, they were sure that ʿAlī would try to shift the power to his son Aḥmad. So unlike the other Arab countries, where popular uprisings were started in late 2010 and especially in early 2011, the one in Yemen was somewhat expected and did not come by surprise.

YEMENI UPRISING – POSTPONEMENT OF A DISASTER

Lan yakūn bunāka tamdīd wa lā tawrīth wa lā iʿādat ʿaqārib al-sāʿat li al-warāʾ, or “there will be no extension, no inheritance, no resetting the clock”. This is how ʿAlī ʿAbdullah ʿAlī spoke on 2 February 2011, several days after the protests against him had started and a day before the *Yawm al-Ghadab*, or the Day of Anger, as the protestors had named their gathering scheduled for 3 February. He also called the Joint Meeting Parties for negotiations about the revision of the Yemeni Constitution. Neither people, nor opposition reacted positively to his words and invitations. The demonstrations continued and in this period they were still without an active participation of the political parties, so the early developments in Yemen had the elements of a real popular uprising. But although the protestors insisted on peaceful and bloodless revolution, the things did turn violent and Yemen was on a brink of a full-scale civil war.

The thing that could have pushed Yemen towards the war was a sniper attack against the protestors that occurred on 18 March 2011 and in which 52 people were killed and 617 wounded. To the disappointment of many Yemenis, in the following period, political actors started being more and more involved and started distancing themselves from ʿAlī ʿAbdullah ʿAlī’s regime. The situation lost its character of a popular uprising and became a ruthless political struggle for power. This disappointment was even bigger when some controversial political characters such as the most hated general ʿAlī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar¹², surely the most powerful army officer, renounced ʿAlī ʿAbdullah ʿAlī’s regime and joined the protestors. There was also an obvious split inside the Yemeni army that resulted in serious clashes all over the country with the city of Taʿizz being the place that suffered the most, along with its inhabitants.

International community, particularly the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (*Majlis al-taʿāwun li-dumal al-khalīj*) Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, supported by the United States decided to try to intervene in the form of an Initiative that would draft the process of ʿAlī ʿAbdullah ʿAlī’s stepping down from power and the beginning of a transitional period.

After the initial rejection from both sides followed by a serious wounding of ʿAlī ʿAbdullah ʿAlī in a bomb attack on 3 June, the opposition was first to agree to sign

¹² ʿAlī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar was ʿAlī ʿAbdullah ʿAlī’s right hand and probably the second most powerful figure in the country. He also had strong ties with Islamic extremists in the past and it was speculated he had been in contact with organisers of the 2000 USS Cole bombing. See footnote 8.

the Initiative. Ali did the same upon his return to Yemen from Saudi Arabia, where he had left after being wounded. The Initiative was signed on 23 November 2011 and marked a new beginning which gave some hope to Yemenis. Still, many people were disappointed by this development as it was full of compromises according to which

Ali was granted amnesty from prosecution. The new president was elected on 21 February 2012. There was only one candidate, Ali's deputy, 'Abdu Rabbuh Man'ar Hādī, but the turnout of around 65% was pretty high, thus confirming people's desire to give the transitional regime a chance. As for the new Government, almost half of its members were from Ali's GPC whereas this party held the most seats in the National Dialogue Conference (*al-Mu'tamar lil- iwa'at al-Wa'an al-'im*), formed in late 2012. Still, the NDC had some good sides that gave people reason for optimism. Women represented 28.5 percent of the 565 members, civil society 7, youth represented 15 percent, etc. 52 percent of the NDC members were from the South (Lackner, 2016, p. 19) which could be understood as a sign of goodwill towards the much less populated part of the country. Also, President Hādī is a southerner, as well as the first prime minister of the transitional Government Mu'ammad Sālim Bāsindawa.

This Conference also included the members of groups such as al-irāk, An'ar Allah (Athas), Salafi party the Rashad Union (*al-Itti'ad al-Rashad*). It was divided into nine subcommittees that were supposed to discuss the most important issues for Yemen and give conclusions about the Southern issue, the Athas issue (called the 'ada issue in the NDC), security affairs, etc. During the whole 2013, it performed a series of interviews about the functioning of NDC. In these interviews, it was clear that Yemenis had great hopes for the future but, at the same time, were worried, particularly about the Athas who constantly showed very rigid attitude without no willingness whatsoever to negotiate.¹³

Still, the NDC was concluded on 24 January 2014 with some major decisions rejected by various dissatisfied sides. The final document suggested the forming of six federal regions with the cities Sana'a and Aden being the separate units (Gagić, 2016, 223-224). The idea was to support the bigger autonomy on the local level and overcome the regional differences, but both Athas and the Southerners opposed this idea, for different reasons. Athas claimed the opposite of the NDC and insisted that the idea of federalization was completely wrong and that it would have disastrous consequences for the unity of the nation. Also, the moment the decision of the NDC about the six region federalization was announced, the Southerners rejected it. It did not come by surprise because a couple of months earlier, one of their leaders Mu'ammad 'Al A'mad¹⁴ stated that "what has been announced about the six regions

¹³ Interview with Mukhtar al-'ammad, then the director for educational programmes in the Ministry of Education of Republic of Yemen – November 2013.

¹⁴ Mu'ammad 'Al A'mad had been a member of the team that discussed the Southern Issue before he left the NDC in November 2013.

is a coup against what had been agreed at the dialogue” (bb.com, 2014). Unlike the Houthis, many Southerners would support the idea of federalization (at least initially), but only if the new country consisted of two federal units, one of them being the territory of former PDRY. However, the idea of only two federal units was refused being regarded as just a mid-step towards the secession of the South.

These huge differences about one of the crucial issues for the future of Yemen nicely describe the failure of the NDC and Yemeni transitional government in general. Yemenis had big hopes and President Hādī did get support from his citizens who came out to the voting polls in big numbers. On the other hand, a series of compromises, made in order to persuade Ali to step down, not only allowed the former president to remain in the country, but also allowed him to remain at the head of GPC which held almost half of the seats in the Government. In 2013 I interviewed a former local elections candidate of the Houthis party. On this occasion, he gave a very bitter comment that Ali was intentionally destabilizing the country and he was “up to something together with the Houthis dogs”. Changing sides and forming hardly imaginable coalitions is not strange to Yemen, but I had to take this statement with a grain of salt, having in mind my interviewee’s Islamist political orientation. In spite of that, his prognosis turned out to be true as everything happened exactly according to his expectations.

YEMEN – THE REPUBLIC OF DEATH, HUNGER AND CHOLERA

Something that at least resembles a sovereign country ceased to exist in March 2015 when the Houthis, backed up with some parts of the Yemeni army loyal to the former president, swept over virtually the whole territory of former YAR and besieged Aden thus triggering a military operation led by Saudi Arabia. These developments were not completely unexpected since the Houthis had already attacked and overrun the Shidiq tribe bastion ‘Amrān Governorate in July 2014. The defeat of the strongest tribal confederation, which was supported by the 310 armoured division led by general ‘Alī Muṣīn al-Aḥmar, as well as by the Yemen Army’s air force, marked the beginning of serious changes in the Yemeni political scene.

On 5 January 2015 the Houthis rejected the draft constitution with the proposal of six region federalization being the main reason for rejection. Shortly afterwards they launched an attack on the presidential palace in Sana’a, which led to the resignation of the Prime Minister Khālid Baḥār¹⁵. On that occasion, President Hādī was put

¹⁵ The Government of Sālim Bāsindawa resigned in September 2015 after the Houthis managed to occupy military barracks as well as several buildings that belonged to Ministry of Defence. This led to the resignation of the Government while ‘Alī Muṣīn’s brother ‘Amr al-Aḥmar and the winner of Nobel prize for peace in 2011 Tawakkul Karmān left the country.

under the house arrest that he left after a month and left to Aden. In the meantime, the Houthis disbanded the Parliament and formed the Revolutionary Committee (*al-Lajna al-Thanriyya*). Since then they have been in control of the Yemeni capital, and since then Yemen has only formally existed as a country, although even before that some elements of Yemen's statehood were very shaky. During the next two months, the Houthis and the parts of the Yemeni Army loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh managed to occupy the territories mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter. What followed was probably the worst possible reaction to these developments. Saudi Arabia has been politically involved in Yemen throughout history and the occupation of this country by Shia rebels, accused of being heavily supported by Iran, was something that the Saudis surely did find very disturbing.

A concise description of what happened in Yemen between 2011 and 2015 was given to me by the director of an Arabic language institute in Sana'a. In an electronic message, several days after the beginning of the air attacks, he wrote that the Saudis did their best to overcome the Yemenis peaceful revolution in 2011, and supported Ali Abdullah Saleh by money and weapons. They were worried about the change, and now they fought Ali Abdullah Saleh because he made an alliance with Iran, and Yemen became a threat. "There will be no solution coming from outside Yemen. But Iran, the Saudis, the USA will never let Yemenis live peacefully", he said.¹⁶ In two sentences he summarized the nature of Saudi involvement in Yemen.

On top of everything, the Saudi-led intervention turned out to be a complete failure, from many aspects. Firstly, no military goals have been achieved so far. After more than two years of severe fighting on land between the coalition forces, supported by the Yemeni army and tribal militias, against the Houthis and the parts of the Army that are loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh and after the same period of heavy bombing, the coalition around the Saudis have only managed to suppress the Houthis from Aden and other former PDRY territories as well as from the areas around Ma'rib. Sadly, this does not mean that Hadi's administration has the control over the southern lands. In fact, even the control of urban areas is doubtful, not to mention the rural and more isolated parts of the country where extremist fractions are thriving. The extremists even kept some bigger cities under control which was not the case at the time this paper was written (liveuamap.com, 2017).

Apart from this minor battlefield success and thriving of extremist fractions, which was expected to happen, there are many other disastrous consequences. Even before the political turmoil that developed into a full-scale war, Yemen was the poorest country in the Peninsula and one of the poorest countries in the World. Severe aggression against it led to a severe starvation of many Yemenis. The UN reports from April 2017 show some very disturbing numbers according to which

¹⁶ Electronic message from 8 April 2015.

6.7 million people were in need of urgent food assistance (un.org, 2017). In total, it is estimated that shocking 17 million people in Yemen, or around 60% of the population, are food insecure (wfp.org, 2017). These numbers undoubtedly show that Yemenis are virtually dying from starvation. Moreover, after the publication of these data, cholera epidemics have erupted, as a direct consequence of increasingly poor living conditions and famine. In July 2017 reports about cholera spoke about the “worst cholera outbreak in the World” with 320 thousand cases recorded, with 5 thousand new cases every day and around 1700 casualties, a quarter of whom were children (Asrar, 2017). The calls for urgent help are responded, but one has to notice the hypocritical behaviour of certain countries. For example, the UK is one of the largest aid and relief donors to Yemen with over 130 million Pounds during 2016. But in the same period, this country sold weapons worth 3.3 billion Pounds to Saudi Arabia (Lackner, 2017). The United States is an even bigger supplier of weapons to the Saudis with 11.25 billion dollar worth weapon sales in 2015 (telesurtv.net, 2015). Both of these two countries’ specialists assist the Saudis in precision targeting, but its goals and results are debatable because until April 2017 in Saudi air raids “270 medical facilities have been bombed, close to 750 schools and more than 500 markets and shops damaged or destroyed” (Lackner, 2017).

Although the role of the foreign factors must never be neglected, describing this situation as not more than a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran (and the two countries’ allies) would be oversimplified. This region suffers badly from a chronic political instability and this is partly due to negative foreign influence, but partly a result of heavily fragmented nature of its society. Unifying Yemen might have been a good idea in theory, but balancing all the specificities of its people and making one system out of two very different ones were very demanding tasks and Yemenis failed to complete them.

After this, Ali imposed northern hegemony while dragging the whole country into poverty by his firmly established patronage system. This way he enabled the development of the separatist organizations such as al-Hirāk. By openly supporting and cooperating with mostly Salafi extremist groups he gave Zaydis a reason to radicalize their movement which they did. Then, by turning against his extremist allies in 2001 Ali opened another front for Yemen and its people. Not that the anti-extremist attitude is bad, but 2001 definitely showed that the cooperation with them was a bad idea in the first place, although this is a lesson that leaders from other, more powerful countries, still have not learned. In any case, the reasons for ever-growing tension among people gradually grew and already in 2011 the situation was ready to explode, and the sides were ready to start the war. It did not start that year, but all that Yemenis succeeded was to postpone something that unfortunately could not be avoided.

In short, Yemen has over past decades turned into a land of poor, frustrated and sick people that are either just trying to find the way not to die from starvation,

diseases or bombs or are fighting for their ideals, causing the death of their fellow Yemenis.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

With the first two sections I intended to briefly show just how heterogeneous Yemeni society really is and how different two political systems were united into one Republic in 1990. These issues are very important for understanding Yemen's inner instability and its political dynamics. Although the contours of mutual South Arabian identity can be recognized, there is no doubt that many regional specificities make the political situation in Yemen very complicated, which is often overlooked. Dealing with these issues was not the main topic of this paper and more information can be found in the works of Stephen Day and Paul Dresch, for example. Also, it has to be noticed that Yemen has always had a reputation of being difficult to govern which is shown in works by historians such as al-'Amrī and al-Mad'aj.

The next two sections showed the failure of the process of transition after the unification during which internal differences, tensions, security and economic issues only grew, mostly due to the corrupt and hegemonic politics of the former President 'Alī 'Abdullah li whose decisions gradually pushed Yemen towards the chaos. The uprising in 2011 did not come by surprise like in other Arab countries. Instead, the situation that I witnessed in 2006 and particularly in 2009 showed bitterness and frustration among Yemenis who, in a series of interviews I performed with them, suggested that the changes are much needed. Unfortunately, for various reasons such as regional differences and external factors, this political transition also failed. At first, a new Civil war was avoided but, in fact, it was just postponed for several years. In this period the tensions only grew and finally led to a full-scale war that started in 2015 and is still going on.

At the moment there is no doubt that the only priority for Yemenis is to stop the ongoing war that has so far taken tens of thousands of lives and pushed a country into an even more extreme poverty. It reached a stalemate with no obvious changes on the battlefield and it does not seem like there are any prospects that the situation can be changed in favour of any of the warring parties. The negotiations are needed but the completely opposite goals of the rival sides are worrying, to say the least. Yemen craves for making advance towards finding the political solution since it has already turned into a country that resembles Somalia, a failed state with an ineffective Government, big parts of the territory under the control of different political actors who do not recognize Government's authority, the strong presence of extremist groups, and a state whose people are exposed to an extreme famine.

As for Yemeni unity, it could be said that it did not fail with the beginning of the political turmoil in 2011, but it actually failed back in 1994. This statement could be

called biased since it backs the southern point of view, but the PDRY entered the unity with the YAR as a fully sovereign state and a member of the United Nations, and it has to be taken into account. Yemeni unity was formed as a consensual one, but its consensual nature remained highly doubtful after 1994, to say the least. The only way for Yemen to protect the unity of the country is to reach an agreement that all sides would be satisfied with and for the South returning to the post-1994 period is surely not an option. Therefore, some sort of federalization of the country would probably be the best solution. *th s* and *li* firmly reject any idea of federalization while the South might consider the idea of two federal units.

In the meantime, *li* for some time continued inciting fight against Saudi Arabia calling his supporters and *th s* to continue their armed struggle (middleeastmonitor.com, 2017). But a couple of months later, *li* again tried to switch sides, as he did on many occasions during his political career. During late summer and autumn, the relations between *li* and *th s* gradually became more and more tense. The two sides had their disagreements in the past, but they culminated and turned violent in late 2017. Finally, on 2 December, *li* obviously felt secure enough to call for a popular revolt against *th s*, but this time he did not succeed and was killed only two days later. Saudis, on the other side, regularly performed their devastating attacks and continued to do so after *li* death.

With this situation, in which death and devastation are parts of everyday life, seriously considering any of the two above-mentioned federalization ideas would be unfoundedly optimistic. All in all, with the lack of feasible political options at the moment and with the obvious stalemate on the battlefield, Yemen is on a way to firmly establish itself as a failed state with its sovereignty left in ruins. Consequently, its unity seems to be further and further away and it might again become just a dream that was briefly interrupted in the early nineties.

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**POLITIKA I DRUŠTVO JUŽNE ARABIJE
– SAN KOJI SE PRETVORIO U STVARNOST
POPUT NOĆNE MORE**

Apstrakt: U najširem smislu ovaj članak bavi se društveno-političkom situacijom u Jemenu, koji je jedna od najkrhkijih i najnestabilnijih zemalja sveta. Prvi deo članka daje pregled društveno-političke situacije u periodu pre ujedinjenja, sa fokusom na razjašnjavanju nekih regionalnih razlika u ovom veoma fragmentiranom društvu. Drugi deo bavi se teškoćama u periodu po ujedinjenju, tokom kojeg su tenzije u Jemenu postepeno rasle i na kraju dovele do rata koji je počeo 2015. godine. Treći deo daje pregled situacije od početka političkog previranja do današnjeg dana.

Jemen je najnepoznatija arapska zemlja a situacija u njoj se uglavnom tumači na pogrešan i previše uprošćen način. Iz tog razoga, cilj ovog članka je da rasvetli zapetljanu jemensku društveno-političku dinamiku, kako bi se omogućilo ispravno razumevanje trenutnog političkog konteksta u ovoj zemlji.

Cljučne reči: Jemen, Južni Jemen, Severni Jemen, ujedinjenje, rat, istorija, društvo, politika.

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