



GULF MARCH 2019

Freed but Not Stabilised: Players and Militias in Post-Conflict Aden

While the Yemen war enters its fifth year, Aden is still far from stabilisation. This despite the civil war ended formally in the city during Summer 2015, when pro-government armed groups forced the Huthis to withdraw from the provisional capital where internationally-recognised institutions had moved.

The “instability trend” is linked with rising geopolitical interests by regional and international players: Aden and its surrounding area (Southern Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Aden) are critical for maritime security and freedom of navigation, international oil trade and geostrategic projection in the Indian Ocean.

From a political perspective, Aden still experiences internal fragmentation: it hosts the recognised executive as well as the pro-secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC). On February 2019, the STC, established in 2017 and supported by most of the Emirati-backed Yemeni forces, held its second National Assembly session in Mukalla, Hadhramawt [*Aden Press*, “STC National Assembly holds its 2nd session in al-Mukalla in mid-February, February 3, 2019], denouncing persisting lack of governance and public services in areas controlled by the recognised government. In a clear opposite initiative, a “Coalition for the South” was convened in Cairo in March 2019, under the informal sponsorship of *interim* President Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi and Saudi Arabia [*Al-Masdar online*, “A southern coalition supporting Hadi holds its first conference in Cairo on Wednesday”].

Aden’s military balances mirror urban political disunity: among the most relevant armed players, the Security Belt Forces, technically under the minister of Interior but answering to the UAE, control some districts in the city (as Al-Buraika, where the oil refinery is located), with check-points; the Presidential Protection Forces, loyal to Hadi, are mainly devoted to protect the presidential palace in Crater district. Some districts have also mixed control.

For this reason, occasional clashes between pro-Hadi, Saudi-backed forces against pro-STC and Emirati-supported groups in Aden have broken out, even after the truce brokered by Saudi and Emirati envoys in January 2018. Since 2017, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Yemeni *vilaya* of the “Islamic State” have significantly decreased the number of attacks in the city, but they continue to operate in Aden. A number of murders have targeted Sunni leaders, also tied to Islah (the party rallying Muslim Brothers and part of Yemen’s Salafis) since 2016 onwards. At a popular level, protests often erupt against fuel and electricity shortages, lack of welfare and public salaries. On January 2019, Aden’s refineries were hit by an explosion.

Regional and international players are attempting to gain (or re-gain) political leverage in post-conflict Aden. In March 2019, the British Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, traveled to the Yemeni Southern city, the first time for a UK foreign secretary since 1996. In the meantime, a delegation of the STC, headed by Aydarous Al-Zubaidi (former governor of Aden), was in London to meet with representatives of the Southern diaspora. Russia announced plans to re-open the consulate in Aden: Moscow could capitalise on a strong partnership with the United Arab Emirates, since Abu Dhabi is now the most powerful foreign player in the South of the country. On the contrary, the United States denied the possibility to open a consulate in Aden, reaffirming their commitment to a unified Yemen. China remains over the horizon, balancing between Saudi Arabia and Iran, supporting the Hadi government and relying on its very strong economic position in the country.

In such a scenario, political rivalries, security fragmentation and regional competing interests could further challenge Aden’s uneasy stabilisation.

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