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Pushing for Independence: South Yemen's critical moment.

Yemen's southern regions are at a turning point. On April 22, 2017, the governor of Hadhramaut, Ahmed Ben Burik, convened a conference in Mukalla to push for regional autonomy. This political initiative was sponsored by the United Arab Emirates (UAE): members of the recognized, Aden-based government didn't attend the event.

On May 4, 2017, thousands of Adenis rallied in the city claiming for independence: they complained about the enduring lack of welfare and public salaries. Demonstrations were headed by Aidarous al-Zubaidi, the already and Emirati-backed Aden's governor, who was previously removed by president Abdu Rabu Mansur Hadi. On the occasion of the gathering, Southern regions' governors signed the "Aden Declaration", calling to al-Zubaidi for the establishment of an autonomous state.

On May 11, 2017, al-Zubaidi announced the creation of a "Transitional Political Council" together with more than twenty Southern Yemeni personalities: the body aims to design a Southern Yemen's political entity, within a year. The Council will also form a military wing.

Yemeni Southern regions' quest for independence is a historical battle: Yemen became an unified state only in 1990 and the North-South civil war broke-out in 1994.

But these ancient claims for autonomy/independence have been now accelerated by Yemen's civil war, plus state governance failure in areas reconquered from the Huthi insurgency, as Aden. In such a war-rescued territories (Aden, Hadhramaut), elite-infighting is fuelling regional and/or tribal-based rivalries for local power, so magnifying Yemen's centrifugal spirits. In this framework, president Hadi's decision to remove the governor of Aden and his cabinet minister of state, Hani Ali bin Brik (on April 27, 2017), has triggered currents developments.

However, a new and regional dynamic emerges to furtherly complicate the Southern issue. As a matter of fact, Hadi and al-Zubaidi's querelle contributes to reveal the existence of a subtle Saudi-Emirati competition for leverage in Yemen, as testified by recurrent, violent clashes between pro-Hadi (pro-Saudis) and secessionist-tied (pro-UAE) militias at the Aden airport.

From the beginning of the civil war, Riyadh has channelled financial and military assistance to the Yemeni Muslim Brothers (al-Islah party) and affiliated tribal militias, while Abu Dhabi has refused to do the same for domestic politics purposes, empowering -on the contrary- secessionist groups (as al-Hiraak al-Janubi, the Southern Movement), or Salafi-style ones.

Southern Yemen's regions instability and Shia rebels' control upon Western coastal territories increase maritime insecurity amid the Bab el-Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Aden. The Huthis attacked warships and mined the al-Mokha port's waters, while commercial vessels are threatened by resurgent piracy assaults.

Therefore, freedom of navigation in the choke-point needs to be protected and has not to be taken for granted anymore. This is also the reason why the UAE decided to station troops in the strategic Socotra island, organizing there intensive training for Yemeni recruits.

Southern Yemen's future kind of governance remains unclear. Surely, the "Southern front" for independence is all but united: rivalries and 'hate legacies' coming from the 1986 intra-South civil war are still alive. In the long-term, the most probable scenario sees Yemeni Southern regions ruled by territorially-based kinships; such micro-powers could occasionally turn to jihadi militias' support in order to protect/expand controlled lands.

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