

Opinion

Editorial

Addressing the root causes of illegal migration is key

Illegal migration will be on the agenda of forthcoming meetings of the world's major powers. The Group of Seven will discuss it in late May in Sicily, as will the Group of 20 in July in Hamburg.

The term has now come to refer chiefly to the ceaseless flow of migrants headed for Europe through Libya.

The situation continues its tragic relentless course while the Mediterranean becomes a vast unmarked grave for thousands. Wave after wave of people – many of them economic migrants – continue to find a channel through lawless Libya's 1,100-mile coastline.

They dream of a prosperous and peaceful life happily remade in Europe but the majority of the unaccompanied minors, young men and women and vulnerable families do not get to Europe. Armed gangs and smugglers often detain hapless travellers in Libya, all the better to enslave them and extort money from them or their families.

When and if the migrants do manage to procure an expensive passage on inadequate dinghies, they are more likely to die at sea than reach Italy and successfully claim asylum.

By the third week of April, the UN refugee agency had recorded more than 1,000 people dead or feared drowned this year in the Mediterranean, en route from Libya to Italy. It is a grim record, achieved more than a month earlier than in 2016. Last year, this tragic benchmark was not reached until the end of May.

The migration business has become a sunshine sector for Libya, albeit one that is shamefully stained with blood. Fifteen months after the Aegean passage closed as a result of the European Union's deal with Turkey, Libya has become the premier back route to Europe. Nothing suggests that Libya will lose its dreadful lure anytime soon. It has multiple governments and militias and so effectively offers an unpoliced open border.

The courses of action offered until now have focused on saving migrants from drowning and on securing Europe's borders but neither of these addresses the core of the problem, that is to say food insecurity, conflict and poor governance in the countries these people are fleeing.

The flood of migrants through Libya is likely to continue with famine looming in South Sudan and Yemen and conflicts in parts of the Middle East and North Africa region. As a new UN study puts it, the number of people fleeing a country increases by 1.9% for each percentage point increase in food insecurity and refugee outflows increase 0.4% for each additional year of war in a country.

Add to that the desperation of sub-Saharan Africans fleeing their governments' draconian diktats and trying to escape armed conflict and it is clear that, especially in good weather, the Libyan back route will continue to be tragically popular.

It is also a fact, however, that Europe is neither an island nor a viable fortress. The North African shore is not separate from the rest of the continent nor can it operate as a drawbridge for fortress Europe.

The international community cannot escape the need to help Africa, the Middle East and North Africa improve conditions at home, offer better prospects and the chance of peace there. That would go beyond short-term expediency.

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and Group Executive Editor
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Contact editor at:
editor@the arabweekly.com

Subscription & Advertising:
Ads@alarab.co.uk
Tel 020 3667 7249

Mohamed Al Mufti
Marketing & Advertising
Manager

Tel (Main) +44 20 7602 3999
Direct: +44 20 8742 9262
www.alarab.co.uk

US Publisher:
Ibrahim Zobeidi
(248) 803 1956

Al Arab Publishing House
Kensington Centre
66 Hammersmith Road
London W14 8UD, UK

Tel: (+44) 20 7602 3999
Fax: (+44) 20 7602 8778



IRANIAN ELECTIONS

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Not the time for jokes in Yemen



Khairallah Khairallah

In dealing with the case of Yemen, we have got to be serious from time to time. I mean we cannot make serious proposals when the legitimate government is really not legitimate and continues to behave as if nothing has happened since 2011.

First, let's not even engage in the exercise of comparing Ali Abdullah Saleh, who served as president of North Yemen from 1978-90 and president of Yemen from 1990-2012, to President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who took over in February 2012 and whose mandate was supposed to last two years only. The two men are oceans apart.

Saleh made some serious errors in judgment, particularly after his victory in the secession war of 1994, but he was not alone in making errors. His allies and partners in victory bear some of the responsibility.

On the top of the list is General Ali Mohsen Saleh al-Ahmar, the current vice-president of Yemen. He was a top army officer and one of the leaders of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Al-Islah), an Islamist party that had its own militia and used it to control Aden and other cities. Wherever Al-Islah's militia went, civil life and openness on the world took leave.

Numerous blunders were made in southern Yemen. Houses and lands, including the home of former Vice-President Ali Salem al-Beidh in Aden, were confiscated by Muslim Brotherhood figures, army officers and businessmen close to Saleh. The southern Yemenis felt persecuted and developed allergic reactions to anything related to North Yemen.

It is a new reality in South Yemen and the "legitimate" authorities must understand that but Hadi continues to make the same mistake of trying to fill Saleh's shoes. He believes that Aden is the same city he had known before the bloody events of January 13, 1986, which ended with the toppling of Ali Nasir Muhammad. The latter was the secretary-general of the ruling Socialist Party and accumulated the roles of president and prime minister of South Yemen. Hadi was one of his loyalists.

The 1986 events were just a struggle for power that had taken regional dimensions. They are now forgotten and the situation in Yemen has evolved. In the north, a new social reality developed. The Houthis came onto the scene and the complex power-sharing scheme in place collapsed. Naturally, the changes reverberated all the way to South Yemen where the social tis-

sue also shifted.

Neither Hadi nor anyone else in Yemen can afford to ignore the presence of new forces on the field any longer. Former Aden Governor Aidarus al-Zubaidi is one of them. He recently demonstrated his power to mobilise people.

I do not wish to defend Zubaidi here for he is perfectly capable of defending himself but we need to recognise some plain realities. In the battle for liberating Aden from the claws of the Houthis and Saleh loyalists, Emirati land forces spear-headed operations and gave many martyrs.

So the interim government cannot just pretend nothing happened in Aden and go back to business as usual by laying hands on Aden's airport and offering it as a source of income for this high official or the other. Some profound reforms are needed to avoid repeating mistakes.

Certain aspects of power cannot be treated with a cavalier attitude because they may affect the whole of Yemen. You cannot, for example, appoint a new governor of Aden just because he has connections.

A quick glimpse at the résumé of Abdel Aziz al-Muflihi, Aden's new governor, gives the impression that he is a flighty person. He was born in 1957 and began his political activism in 1965, in other words at the tender age of 8. He claimed that he was sentenced to death in 1974, in other words when he was 17, when he ran afoul with the government of South Yemen.

Let's be serious now. We are dealing with someone who became politically active at the age of 8 and quickly turned into a staunch government enemy at the age of 17. Who would believe that, especially when we are dealing with a near unknown who thinks of himself as one of the 500 most influential people in the world?

This is no time for jokes in Yemen. This is the time for serious hard work and serious work begins by admitting that everything has changed in Yemen.

There is a pressing need to recognise that the real successes on the ground in Yemen had occurred in Aden, Mukallah and Mocha. If we want to lay a solid foundation for a better Yemen, there is no shame in accepting who was behind the recent achievements. It is time for Hadi to realise that Aden has fundamentally changed since the 1980s and that he can no longer wear Ali Abdullah Saleh's shoes.

Khairallah Khairallah
is a Lebanese writer.

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