

MIDDLE EAST

Developments in Southern Yemen: Significance, Implications, and Prospects for Peace

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In early May, a [reshuffling](#) took place within Yemen's Southern Transitional Council (STC), the Southern separatist body that is also part of the internationally recognized government, known as the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). The head of the STC, Aiderous al-Zubeidi, appointed Faraj Salmeen Muhammad al-Bahsani, the former governor of Hadramawt governorate, and Abdul Rahman Saleh Zain al-Mahrami, the chief of the [Giants Brigades](#), a powerful Southern armed group backed by the UAE. With this reshuffle, the STC has increased its political and military strength: politically, three of the PLC's eight members are now prominent figures within the STC; militarily, the reshuffle has united the two strongest armed factions in the South.

The restructuring came shortly after the end of the [Southern Consultative Meeting](#) (SCM), held in Aden from May 4th-8th and attended by most Southern groups. In the end, participants adopted the [Southern National Pact](#) (SNP), which states that the "South issue is a land and human issue [...]. Its representation in the settlement process under the auspices of the United Nations must be within an independent framework." Unsurprisingly, the Houthis,[\[1\]](#) reacted by [describing](#) the SNP as a "coup against the Republic of Yemen" that does not "reflect good intentions towards the existing understandings [of peace] and towards Yemen and its unity."

The Southern Issue and the STC

The Southern issue is nothing new, but rather an integral part of the country's recent history. Historically two separate entities, it was not until May 1990 that South Yemen (the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen) and North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic) were hastily

united. Since many in the South came to believe that they had ceded too much power to the North just to be neglected and marginalized, it did not take long for tensions to emerge. In 1994, a war broke out between Southern separatists and Northern unionists. The latter won and [the Southern Movement \(al-Hirak\) gradually emerged](#) in 2007.

Today, the STC [is the major player](#) in the South and is widely regarded as the successor of Hirak. It was [established in May 2017](#) with the goal of re-establishing Southern Yemen as a sovereign state. In April 2022, the PLC [was created](#) in Riyadh to replace former President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and unite the different anti-Houthi factions. Since then, the STC has been part of the PLC. However, the relationship between them is a troubled one.

Saudi-Emirati Dynamics

The uneasy relationship between STC and PLC is first and foremost rooted in the two bodies' different visions for Yemen: while the PLC supports a unified Yemen, the STC aspires to a two-state reality. Yet, tensions are also explained by regional dynamics. The PLC [was created at the Saudis' and Emiratis' behest](#) at a moment when the government's weakness vis-à-vis the Houthis became too threatening for the Gulf monarchies' security. Since the onset, however, Saudi Arabia and the UAE [have been sponsoring different Council members](#) to better secure their own specific interests. In fact, while the Saudis and the Emiratis initially intervened together on Hadi's side in the Yemeni conflict, over time they came to [develop different aspirations](#) and [pursue different strategies](#).

The STC is univocally supported by the UAE, which uses the body as an instrument to further its influence over Southern Yemen and the southern Red Sea – an area of great strategic value that comprises the crucial Bab al-Mandab Strait. Therefore, at a regional level, the UAE seems to be the great beneficiary of the latest developments in Southern Yemen. As the STC gains greater political influence and military strength, the UAE is well-positioned to advance its interests through its Yemeni partner. This is even more important in a situation whereby the UAE is excluded from the talks between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis, who have been negotiating bilaterally for months to reach a peace agreement.

Negotiations and Prospects for Peace

The context in which the SNP was reached and the reshuffle of the STC orchestrated is one of the deep changes in the broader Yemeni conflict. Following the ceasefire signed in April 2022, the front lines have stayed mostly quiet, even though the agreement formally collapsed last October. The pause in hostilities helped the Houthis and Saudis to engage in bilateral talks. More recently, this diplomacy was further facilitated by the [rapprochement deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran](#), whereby [Iran agreed to stop arming](#) the Houthis and discourage the group from launching attacks against Saudi Arabia. In mid-April, a Saudi delegation traveled to Sana'a to discuss a [permanent cease-fire](#). Disagreement [remained on some points](#) – the use of oil revenues, the timeframe for the exit of foreign troops, the payment of salaries to civil personnel and security forces – but the talks were nonetheless followed by an important prisoner exchange. As of the time of this writing, talks between the Saudis and the Houthis are reportedly continuing.

However, the recent developments in the South are a reminder that the reality of the Yemeni conflict is much more complex than the narrative of a Houthi-Saudi peace suggests. The [first problem](#) is that the talks have been exclusively between the Houthis and the Saudis, with the PLC never included in any meaningful way. Thus, while the current negotiations might bring an end to the conflict between the Houthis and Riyadh, the Yemeni dimension of the war remains unaddressed. A second problem, made increasingly apparent by the events of the last weeks, is that even in the case of negotiations between the Houthis and the PLC, the STC will hardly ever agree to a power-sharing government but rather try to secure Southern independence. This will not be accepted by the Houthis, who want a unified Yemen. In this scenario, the prospect of renewed conflict breaking out between the Houthis and the STC is very likely.

The United States, the European Union, and the Efforts for Peace

During the SCM, international observers kept mostly silent, with the European and American media and decision-makers giving little-to-no attention to those events. In mid-May, an [EU delegation](#) met in Aden with the head of the PLC. According to reports, however, the Southern issue did not occupy any special part in the discussions. Concurrently, [US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Hans Grundberg, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen](#). Although many topics were discussed during the meeting, Yemen's Southern issue does not seem to

have been among them. The only limited exception was a [briefing by the US Special Envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking](#), in which he mentioned the South among a series of issues that Yemenis will need to discuss to determine the nature of their future state. However, he failed to elaborate on how the Southern issue affects current prospects for peace. Moreover, on May 17, a briefing on Yemen was given to the UN Security Council. [There as well](#), however, the issue of the South was completely overlooked.

As the STC becomes more powerful and more cohesive, the EU and the US, as parties involved in the effort to help a Yemeni transition towards peace, need to pay more attention to the reality of the Southern issue and appreciate the relevance and implications of Southern dynamics over the country's trajectory. If and when a Houthi-Saudi agreement is reached, the road to comprehensive peace will still be long, arduous, and significantly affected by the Southern issue. Ignoring this now will come at a high price later.

[1] The Houthis are a large clan originating from Yemen's northwestern Saada province. Practicing the Zaydi form of Shiism, they comprise about **35 percent** of Yemen's population. Since September 2014, they have been in control of Northern Yemen, including the capital Sana'a. Throughout the conflict, the Houthis have been supported by Iran, which has provided the Yemeni group with weapons, training, and know-how.

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