



May 3, 2022

Made in KSA: The Risks of an Imposed Presidential Council

Osamah Al Rawhani



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover diplomatic, political, social, economic and security-related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

Cover Photo:

Saudi ruler King Salman shakes hands with Rashad al-Alimi, head of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, on April 28, 2022// Photo credit: SPA

Since President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi stepped aside in early April, the overwhelming consensus among Yemenis has been “good riddance.” Replacing Hadi with a presidential council was doubtless the best way forward, but the devil is in the details when it comes to political systems, and there are many devilish details lurking in Yemen’s newly appointed Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). They will emerge as the council works out how it will operate and as its hastily thrown-together members decide to what extent they are willing to trust one another. The largest and most frustrating, however, is that the council was formulated by foreign parties without substantive Yemeni input. And because it was not created by Yemenis to represent Yemenis, its members – nearly all of them military leaders manufactured by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – do not owe their council positions or governing power to the will of the Yemeni people.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, under the umbrella of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), formed the presidential council in early April to replace Hadi. The move was reminiscent of the later stages of Yemen’s Arab Spring-inspired revolution, when Saudi Arabia pushed the GCC to be the nominal vehicle to convince then-president Ali Abdullah Saleh to cede power. Over a decade later, the tension between Hadi and key Saudi officials had become palpable. Hadi’s relationship with the UAE also was tense and complicated, particularly concerning the role of Islah (an ally of the former and enemy of the latter). Although Riyadh belatedly decided to pull its support for Hadi, Yemenis have been disillusioned for some time with his absentee leadership from Riyadh; he had long appeared most concerned with protecting his own and his family’s interests. Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s installation of the council, viewed in this light, continues the process of denying Yemenis sovereignty over their own affairs and risks dangerous complications down the road.

Most Yemenis invited to the Riyadh consultations were not informed of the plan to reformulate executive power in advance, presumably to head off any resistance to the new council. Leading political figures were kept in the dark. There was little evidence of serious planning for inclusive and effective consultations, and there was not even a Yemeni preparatory committee setting the agenda to ensure Yemeni-led outcomes. At times, key political players found themselves shunted onto new advisory and reconciliation authorities and legal and economic committees. Some have already withdrawn.

The forum’s purpose all along was likely to fasten the trappings of legitimacy, provided by attendees, to a predetermined transfer of power. Saudi Arabia worked hard to ensure that all the prominent voices among the more than 800 participants were present in Riyadh, where they would be less likely to raise significant objections. A Saudi intelligence committee acted as sponsor for the vast majority of participants, meaning they could not leave the country without the permission of Saudi officials. Many remained in the kingdom a few weeks later, on the special residency visas provided by the Saudis, and little emerged from the consultations themselves beyond what Saudi Arabia and the UAE intended.

Yemen’s key political parties were kept in separate rooms, and ultimately were told there were no other options; those unwilling to sign on to the transition publicly remained silent, but several spoke privately of feeling manipulated into accepting the outcome. Some party leaders said privately they were shocked at what they viewed as a deceptive imposition by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in which the GCC was complicit. At the least, such a council might be expected to be formed with the agreement of the different political and military powers. This did not happen.

Overlooking the Lack of Trust, Divergent Interests of PLC Appointees

Another concerning aspect of the PLC is that it fails to address the fragmentation on the side of the internationally recognized government. The components of the council do not trust each other, and had not undertaken any prior negotiations among themselves or agreed to work together within this body. Any efforts to ease tensions and build a unified agenda will be undertaken after formation, which is a more complicated proposition. The only parties that members are committed to are the Saudis and the UAE, which disregarded the significance of the PLC members' conflicting domestic agendas.

The STC, for instance, appears torn between the opportunity to be part of the executive and the pursuit of its irreconcilable secessionist agenda. During the constitutional oath in front of parliament, STC President Aiderous al-Zubaidi, now a deputy member of the PLC, purposely and clearly omitted two key components of the oath; protecting the republican system and maintaining unity. The omission was allowed to pass, but it indicates that the parties of the presidential council are not yet unified in purpose. This is an alarming proposition given the depth of Yemen's crisis.

Al-Zubaidi's conspicuous gesture indicates the new power structure does not necessarily align with the STC's aspirations in the south. That an act of dissent occurred on the first step toward legitimacy suggests further disagreements may be forthcoming. Al-Zubaidi is now one of eight men ruling the state and one of four representing the south, but there is no indication he has shifted in his aspirations for an independent south. Reining in these aspirations, or redirecting them to the cause of national unity, may be an insurmountable challenge. Whether he lasts on the council likely depends on the UAE, now that it has recommitted to the intervention in Yemen and won its power struggle against Hadi and the Islah party.

Although Islah is indirectly represented on the presidential council, this does not mean it agreed to the formulation before it was announced. The party pushed back against the initiative during closed-door political discussions in Riyadh, but ultimately conceded a formidable decrease in political influence. Along with fully excluding other traditional political powers from the council, including the Socialists, Nasserites and the Rashad party, the PLC was left dominated by military and militia leaders. This is risky in every political sense.

Sidelining Political Figures Damages Claims to Legitimacy

It could be argued that the current membership represents a great achievement, as it manages to bring these military powers together, limiting disputes among the anti-Houthi alliance and providing a united front. But such a rosy outlook is hostage to the trust among these groups, which does not yet exist. Furthermore, most of these military leaders are indebted to the Saudi-led coalition, created and fully funded by the UAE and/or Saudi Arabia. They would not have existed or survived if not for the coalition. In addition, three deputies of the new council are military leaders who previously refused to operate under

the internationally recognized government, instead reporting directly to their paymasters in Abu Dhabi. The executive is now fully beholden to regional powers, with their separate military proxies and divergent interests. Any new rift between Saudi Arabia and the UAE would mean fragmentation at the highest levels of state.

The PLC should have been composed of political parties with political identities, its members then directing military leaders. However, prominent party and independent leaders who could have brought political legitimacy and a civilian character to the PLC were pushed out of the direct decision-making cycle, becoming part of a 50-member advisory body. Only here will one find Yemen's socialists and Nasserites and other political parties; there are no women on the PLC and only a few were appointed to advisory panels. Yemen, which strives to deliver basic services, clearly needs at least one statesman or woman with economic and policy expertise on its highest executive body. It is not easy or even possible to represent all Yemenis, but the PLC fails to meet even the basic political, economic or social representations that would ensure citizens' needs are considered.

Governments can only operate at the speed of trust, and that trust must be found beyond the confines of individual PLC members' relationships with their respective patrons if this presidential council is to perform, or even survive. The coalition has reinforced its hold on power in Yemen, with more direct authority than before. At this point, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have placed their trust in their allies and appointees on the council, and the GCC and international community have rallied behind them. But there is little trust among council members themselves, and little reason for Yemenis today to view the council as a representative executive body keen to serve their interests. Regardless of whether the expansion of the executive generates any tangible short- or medium-term improvements, its imposition by a foreign state undermines its capacity to provide long-term stability or prevent the fragmentation of the state. Yemen has been freed from Hadi but continues to have little control over its future, and Yemeni political leaders, shamefully, continue to allow Yemeni sovereignty to remain hostage to outside interference.

Osamah Al Rawhani is the deputy executive director of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. He is an expert in the field of peace and conflict resolution, and has worked to advance community development and civic participation in Yemen through numerous initiatives, programs and civil society organizations. For the past... read more.

