



The Yemen Review

April 2022

Changing of the Guard

April 2022



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:

A soldier salutes an image of Rashad al-Alimi, head of Yemen's new Presidential Leadership Council, during an April 19, 2022, forum held by the Taiz local authority in Taiz city to encourage parties and public figures to support the PLC.// Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al-Basha

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Executive Summary

The surprise resignation of long-serving President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the appointment of a new Presidential Leadership Council heralded a busy month of political and economic developments in Yemen, as a UN-brokered Ramadan truce largely held across the country. Hadi ceded his powers to a council of prominent military figures led by former Interior Minister Rashad al-Alimi at talks in Riyadh, in a move nominally brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council. The handover was orchestrated by Saudi Arabia and the UAE with little to no consultation of Yemeni political figures. In the interim capital Aden, the council was sworn in before a rare meeting of Parliament while support was rapidly voiced by the UN Security Council and the United States. The Houthis have characterized the new council as illegitimate and contrived by foreigners; they had made similar criticisms of Hadi's administration. The Saudis and UAE committed US\$3 billion in new funding for the government, earmarked for development and assistance to the Central Bank in Aden; the news has already increased the value of the Yemeni riyal in government-held areas.

Though sporadic violence has continued, the military truce brokered by UN Special Envoy Hans Grunberg remained intact through the month of April. The resumption of flights from Sana'a International Airport, another component of the agreement, remained stalled, but the resumption of oil and gas imports via Hudaydah port has helped mitigate nationwide fuel shortages. There are fears that the Houthis may use the lull in violence to reinforce and re-manuever their forces ahead of another assault on the oil-rich stronghold of Marib. And while the ascendance of the Presidential Leadership Council has been greeted with skeptical approval as an improvement over the Hadi presidency, there are concerns about the council's ability to work together to meet the enormity of Yemen's crises.



Presidential Council Replaces Hadi

Casey Coombs

Developments in Government-Controlled Territory

In the early hours of April 7, President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi dismissed Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and then **signed over his executive authority to a Presidential Leadership Council** (PLC). This transfer of power from Hadi to an eight-man body was announced from Riyadh, where Yemeni parties had gathered for consultations sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The reformed leadership body brings together disparate factions within the anti-Houthi alliance. It is headed by Rashad al-Alimi, a former interior minister. The other seven members of the PLC are Marib Governor Sultan al-Aradah, Southern Transitional Council (STC) President Aiderous al-Zubaidi, National Resistance forces leader Tareq Saleh, Chief of Staff of the Presidential Office Abdullah al-Alimi, Hadramawt Governor Faraj al-Bahsani, Giants Brigades Commander Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (aka Abou Zaraa) and Member of Parliament Othman al-Mujali.

Presidential Leadership Council

Rashad al-Alimi



Position/affiliations: President of the council. Member of the General Committee of the General People's Congress (GPC). Participant in the National Dialogue Conference.
Home governorate: Taiz
Bio: Born in Taiz in 1954, he became interior minister in 2001 and was responsible for security coordination on counterterrorism with Saudi Arabia, building a strong relationship with his Saudi counterpart, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. In 2008, he became deputy prime minister and minister of interior for defense and security affairs. In the same year, he was assigned as a minister of local administration but continued to operate as a key insider of the Saleh regime. He holds a doctoral degree in Sociology.

Sultan al-Aradah



Position/affiliations: Governor of Marib. Former army general and Member of Parliament for the General People's Congress (GPC). Member of Marib's dominant Abidah tribe.
Home governorate: Marib
Bio: Born in Marib in 1958, Al-Aradah holds the military rank of major general. He was appointed governor of Marib governorate in 2012. Although a member of the GPC, he forged good relations with the Islah party during his term as governor.

Tareq Saleh



Position/affiliation: Member of the GPC party. Head of the National Resistance forces and its Political Bureau.
Home governorate: Sana'a
Bio: Born in Sana'a in 1970, Tareq is the nephew of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. He commanded the 3rd Brigade of the Republican Guards before being sacked in April 2012. In 2013, Saleh was assigned as a military attache in the Yemeni embassy in Germany. Aligned with his uncle and the Houthis during the early years of the war, Tareq switched sides after the former president's murder at the hands of the Houthis in December 2017. Tareq heads the National Resistance forces and its Political Bureau.

Aiderous al-Zubaidi



Position/affiliation: President of the Southern Transitional Council (STC).
Home governorate: Al-Dhalea
Bio: Born in 1967, Al-Zubaidi was appointed governor of Aden in 2015. His sacking in 2017 led to the creation of the STC, a powerful secessionist party that controls the interim capital.

Abdullah al-Alimi



Position/affiliation: Member of the Islah party.
Home governorate: Shabwa
Bio: Born in Shabwa in 1979, Al-Alimi first gained prominence as part of the 2011 revolution as an orator in Change Square in Aden. He began working in the presidential office in 2012 and became director of the office of the president in 2016. In recent years, he became a gatekeeper to former President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and enjoyed good access to the Saudis.

Faraj al-Bahsani



Position/affiliation: Governor of Hadramawt.
Home governorate: Hadramawt
Bio: Born in 1955 in Hadramawt, Al-Bahsani was appointed commander of the 2nd Military Region in 2015. He carries the rank of major general and heads the Hadrami Elite forces. In 2017, he was appointed governor of Hadramawt.

Abdelrahman Abou Zaraa al-Muharrami



Position/affiliation: Leader of the Giants Brigades.
Home governorate: Lahj
Bio: Abou Zaraa is a Salafi and was a member of the Dammaj institute in Sa'ada, the site of battles between Salafi and Houthi forces in 2013-14. Since 2015, Abou Zaraa has led the UAE-backed Giants Brigades, which fought against Houthi forces first in Aden and then in Hudaydah. The deployment of Giants Brigades forces to Shabwa in late 2021 pushed Houthi forces out of the governorate in January 2022, stalling their offensive against the strategic city of Marib.

Othman al-Mujali



Position/affiliation: Member of the GPC.
Home governorate: Sa'ada
Bio: Born in Sa'ada in 1970, Al-Mujali became a member of the parliament in 1997. A long-time ally of the Saudis, he fought Houthi forces during the Sa'ada wars in the 2000s on the government side. He was appointed as a minister of state for parliament and shura council affairs in 2016.

On April 13, the UN Security Council issued a [statement](#) welcoming the peaceful transfer of power from Hadi to the PLC. A member of the Houthi political negotiating team, Abdelmalek al-Ajri, based in Oman's capital Muscat, rejected the UNSC statement in a [Twitter post, writing](#), "Legitimacy in [the UNSC's] view since 2011 is something decided by the outside, and Saudi Arabia specifically, as the legitimate guardian, and it has nothing to do with the will of the Yemenis."

Following the transfer of power, the newly-appointed executive body remained in Riyadh for about a week-and-a-half holding meetings, before returning to the interim capital Aden. There, on April 19, the PLC was sworn in at a [ceremony](#) held at the Coral Hotel in Khormaksar district. It was attended by government-affiliated members of parliament, the cabinet, Shura Council, Supreme Judicial Council, Supreme Elections Committee and Military Affairs Committee, as well as a number of international actors, including ambassadors from the GCC states, European Union, five permanent members of the UN Security Council, UN special envoy to Yemen Hans Grundberg and US special envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking. In a [speech](#) outlining the PLC's priorities, Al-Alimi said that the council would work as a team to "confront all political, military, security, economic and social challenges, foremost of which is ending the coup and the war, restoring the state, peace and stability, addressing economic and living conditions and rebuilding and stabilizing institutions in the interim capital, Aden, and throughout the country."

The swearing-in for the PLC marked only the second time that the internationally recognized government's parliament had convened since the Houthis seized control of the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014. In April 2019, the parliament held a meeting in the city of Sayoun in Hadramawt governorate, during which a new speaker, Sultan al-Barakani of the General People's Congress party, was elected. It is notable that the parliament was able to convene in Aden, given that partisan infighting within the anti-Houthi alliance has for years prevented the government from carrying out its duties there, particularly since the STC seized control of the interim capital in August 2019.

On April 20, the PLC issued its first republican decree, [appointing](#) the governor of Aden, Ahmed Lamlas, as a minister of state and a member of the cabinet, in line with the decades-long practice of having the mayor of the capital become a member of the cabinet without portfolio. The next day, the PLC held its first [meeting](#) with the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission (CRC), which was formed to support the PLC by bridging differences among political factions in the anti-Houthi alliance at the negotiating table. The 50-member commission is led by: chairman Mohammed al-Ghaithi, head of the STC's foreign affairs department; and vice-chairpersons Abdulmalik al-Mikhlaifi, a former adviser to ex-President Hadi; pro-Islah parliament member Sakhr al-Wajih; Jamila Ali Rajaa, a consultant to international governments and organizations and an expert in peacebuilding and mediation; and Judge Akram al-Amiri. (Eds. Note: Rajaa serves as a member of the Sana'a Center's Advisory Board.)

On April 22, parliament gave a vote of confidence in the government of Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed, formed in line with the Riyadh Agreement on December 19, 2020, which consists of 24 ministerial posts.

On April 23, Speaker of the House of Representatives Sultan Al-Barakani, Speaker of the Shura Council and former Prime Minister Ahmed Obaid bin Dagher and other Yemeni politicians departed from Aden's international airport. The departures, which occurred less than 48 hours after the swearing-in of the PLC and approval of the prime minister's program of work, were criticized on social media by Yemenis who called on the leaders to govern from inside the country. The pair returned to Aden on May 1.

On the same day, May 1, members of the presidential council arrived in the interim capital Aden, ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday marking the end of Ramadan and following visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The PLC met with Saudi ruler King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on April 28 before traveling to Abu Dhabi, where the members held talks with Emirati Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed on April 30.

For further analysis on the presidential council, see '[Hadi Out, Presidential Council Takes Over](#)', '[What the New Ruling Council Means for the South](#)', '[Made in KSA: The Risks of an Imposed Presidential Council](#)' and '[Taiz in Power](#)'.

Developments in Houthi-Controlled Territory

Houthi Leaders Reject Formation of PLC

Immediately following the announcement of the PLC, senior Houthi leader Mohammed Ali al-Houthi rejected its formation on Twitter, stating, "Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi's powers have expired, so he has no powers to transfer to others," referring to the fact that Hadi stayed on beyond the two-year term to which he was appointed in February 2012 to succeed former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Al-Houthi later deleted the tweet. Oman-based Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdelsalam also commented on the council, [saying](#) on Twitter that the "Yemeni people are not concerned with illegal measures issued outside the borders of their homeland by an illegal party."

Houthi Leader Proposes Replacing Curriculum with Quran

On April 6, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi [called on](#) the Houthi de facto government to carry out educational reforms in which children in grades one through four would only study the Quran. The Houthis have made a number of [changes](#) to the educational system they control in northern Yemen to indoctrinate youth with their ideology. Changes include the introduction of a curriculum that emphasizes the history of Yemen's Zaidi imams, glorifies the Houthis' rise to power and portrays them as the protectors of Yemen and depicts the Saudi-led coalition as being supported by the "American-Zionist alliance." The group has also used extra-curricular education programs to preach their ideology to children as a means to recruit fighters.

UN Special Envoy Makes First Trip to Sana'a

On April 13, Hans Grundberg, the UN special envoy, concluded a three-day [visit](#) to Sana'a, marking his first visit to Houthi-controlled territory since he was appointed in July 2021. Grundberg met with Houthi government officials including Prime Minister Abdulaziz bin Habtoor, President Mahdi al-Mashat and Foreign Minister Hisham Sharaf. However, the UN envoy did not meet with any senior military or security officials close to Abdelmalek al-Houthi, who are considered the true power brokers in the Houthi system.

Journalist Rights Group Reports Houthi Abduction of Yemeni Reporter

On April 14, the National Organization of Yemeni Journalists, Sada, [reported](#) that journalist Nadia Moqbel had been abducted from a street in Sana'a by Houthi authorities on March 28. The organization said that it had received information that Moqbel, who works for Al-Malassi News Network, had disappeared after reporting on the rapid rise of food prices in the run up to Ramadan. Sada stated that Moqbel's family later found the journalist at the Haziz police department, where authorities said she was being held until investigations were completed.

Houthi Gunmen Crack Down on Sunni Worshippers During Ramadan

On April 14, video footage surfaced on social media showing Houthi gunmen preventing worshippers in Al-Iman mosque in Sana'a from performing the Taraweeh prayers. At least three similar incidents have been reported in Sana'a mosques since the start of Ramadan on April 2. In one incident in Al-Waitat neighborhood near Sana'a International Airport, two worshippers were killed and seven others were injured, [according to Al-Masdar Online](#). The Houthis were also reported to have turned a number of other mosques where Taraweeh prayers are performed into gathering places for its members to chew qat, conduct sectarian lessons and listen to Abdelmalek al-Houthi's daily speeches from 8 to 11 p.m., which overlap with the Taraweeh prayers. Observed by Sunni Muslims after the Isha prayers during Ramadan, Taraweeh prayers last for about two hours, during which the imam recites from the Quran. Houthi authorities carried out similar violent [crackdowns](#) on Taraweeh prayers last year during Ramadan.

Houthi Policy Restricts Women's Freedom of Movement

On April 15, Yemeni activists [posted](#) a document online reflecting a new Houthi policy aimed at restricting women's freedom of movement in areas under their control. According to a car rental form that Houthi authorities have required companies to fill out, women are not allowed to travel outside their home governorate without a male guardian's consent. The regulations also extend to women traveling in private cars and taxis as well as women working for non-governmental organizations who often travel for work, according to a human rights activist who spoke to the Sana'a Center on the condition of anonymity. Yemeni human rights organization SAM Rights and Liberties discussed the measure in a new [report](#), documenting restrictions on women's rights in Houthi-held areas. Restrictions include prohibiting anyone except fathers or mothers from attending girls' school celebrations, banning women from working in restaurants, forbidding the wearing of certain types of abayas and discouraging the use of cosmetics.

Omani Delegation Visits Sana'a, Departs with Wounded Fighters

On April 22, an Omani delegation accompanied by Houthi political negotiators arrived in Sana'a. Houthi-run news outlet Al-Masirah [described](#) the visit as part of the sultanate's role in helping facilitate the UN-sponsored truce that went into effect on April 2. Yemen Future [reported](#) that the plane arrived with more than 20 Yemeni individuals on board and later carried 83 wounded Houthi fighters outside the country. Muscat has served as the headquarters of the Houthis' negotiating delegation throughout the war. Last June, Omani officials accompanied by senior Houthi figures based in Muscat visited Sana'a in an effort to facilitate peace talks. The delegation departed after a week with no announcement of progress.

Resumption of Commercial Flights From Sana'a Canceled Amid Passport Row

On April 23, the internationally recognized government announced the cancellation of the first commercial flight set to take off from Houthi-held Sana'a in about six years. Scheduled to fly to Amman, Jordan, on April 24, the flight was supposed to mark the resumption of two weekly flights in and out of the capital as part of a two-month truce between the internationally recognized government and the Houthis that went into effect on April 2. The Houthis accused the Saudi-led coalition of failing to issue the necessary permits for the flight, while the information minister of the internationally recognized government, Muammar al-Iryani, [said](#) the Houthis had broken an agreement by insisting on adding more than 60 passengers with unverified passports to the flight. Al-Iryani accused the Houthis of trying to use forged passports to smuggle dozens of its leaders, as well as members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hezbollah, onto the flight. In their annual report published in January 2021, the [UN Panel of Experts](#) expressed concern about the potential misuse of humanitarian "mercy flights" operating out of Sana'a, noting that a Houthi arms smuggler had admitted to posing as a companion to a wounded individual on one of the flights departing Sana'a as a way to facilitate his and other smugglers' travel to Iran for naval training. After his training in Iran's Bandar Abbas naval port, he later returned to Sana'a on another mercy flight and participated in smuggling missions between Yemen and Iran.

Fourteen Foreign Prisoners Released by Houthis, Flown to Oman

On April 24, Oman evacuated 14 foreigners by plane to Muscat from Sana'a, where they had been imprisoned by the Houthis. The freed individuals included a British man, his wife and child, seven Indian nationals, an Ethiopian, a Filipino, an Indonesian and a Burmese national, according to a [statement](#) by Oman's foreign ministry. The British citizen, Luke Symons, had been held without charge or trial since 2017, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said in a statement, adding that he "was allegedly mistreated, in solitary confinement, and refused visits by his family." The other eleven foreigners were the crew of an Emirati cargo ship, *Rwabee*, that had been seized by the Houthis off Yemen's Red Sea coast on January 3.

Houthis Sign UN Plan Pledging to End Use of Children in War

On April 25, the UN announced that a Houthi official had signed what the UN described as an “action plan” to “end and prevent recruiting or using children in armed conflict, killing or maiming children and attacking schools and hospitals,” according to the Associated Press. UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said Houthi official Abdul Eluh Hajar pledged to identify children in their ranks and release them within six months.

International Developments

Internationally Recognized Government Rekindles Diplomatic Ties with Beirut

On April 8, Yemen's internationally recognized government announced the return of its ambassador to Lebanon, after an absence of more than five months due to the diplomatic fallout from comments made by Lebanese Minister of Information George Kordahi about the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. In late October 2021, footage of an August 5 interview surfaced in which Kordahi, a month prior to becoming a minister, said the Houthis were defending themselves against what he called “external aggression.” Saudi Arabia reacted by expelling Lebanon's ambassador to the kingdom and banning all Lebanese imports. Other Saudi allies, including the internationally recognized government in Yemen, joined the diplomatic boycott. Kordahi subsequently resigned. On Twitter, Mohammed Ali Al-Houthi urged Lebanon to reject the returning Yemeni ambassador.

Houthis Signal Doubts Over FSO Safer Agreement as UN Seeks to Mobilize Funding

On April 8, UN Resident Representative and Humanitarian Coordinator David Gressly said that it would cost approximately US\$80 million to salvage the FSO Safer oil tanker, lease a crude carrier to hold its 1.1 million barrels of oil and secure a crew and maintenance for 18 months. The announcement comes about a month after the UN signed a preliminary deal with Houthi authorities to swap out the 45-year-old oil tanker moored off the Houthi-controlled port of Hudaydah. The aging vessel poses an unprecedented environmental threat to the Red Sea ecosystem. In mid-April, Gressly visited capitals in the Gulf region to drum up support and funding for the salvage operation, which is expected to get underway in early June.

On April 9, Ibrahim al-Saraji, the Houthi official tasked with negotiating the deal, said that the UN had failed to submit an operational plan to implement it, adding that this might signal a lack of UN commitment. In recent years, the Houthis have repeatedly pulled out of negotiations with the UN to inspect, maintain and repair the Floating Storage and Offloading (FSO) terminal, owned by Yemen's national oil company, SAFER Exploration and Production Operation Company.

Houthis' Iraq Envoy Celebrates Iran-backed Militia

On April 20, a video surfaced on social media showing Houthi leader Mohammed al-Qibli **attending** a celebration marking the 41st anniversary of the founding of the Iran-backed Badr Organization in Iraq. Al-Qibli, a Yemeni tribal sheikh from Al-Bayda governorate who has represented the Houthis in Iraq throughout the war, is seen behind the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad. The ceremony was attended by the Iraqi prime minister, the speaker of parliament and several Iraqi militia leaders backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which also supports the Houthis in Yemen. Previously, Al-Qibli has been pictured meeting with other Iran-backed Iraqi militia leaders, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was killed alongside IRGC chief Qassem Soleimani in a US drone strike in January 2020.

Casey Coombs is a researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. Coombs also works as an independent journalist, reporting extensively on Yemen, where he was based between ۲۰۱۲ and ۲۰۱۵. Prior to Yemen, he reported from United Nations headquarters in New York, covering UN Security Council work on the Arab political uprisings.

He holds BAs in English & Anthropology and an MS in International Relations.



Yemeni army troops near the Um Reish military camp in Al- Jubah district, Marib governorate, on January 14, 2022 // Sana'a Center photo by Abdulmajeed Al Khadhmi

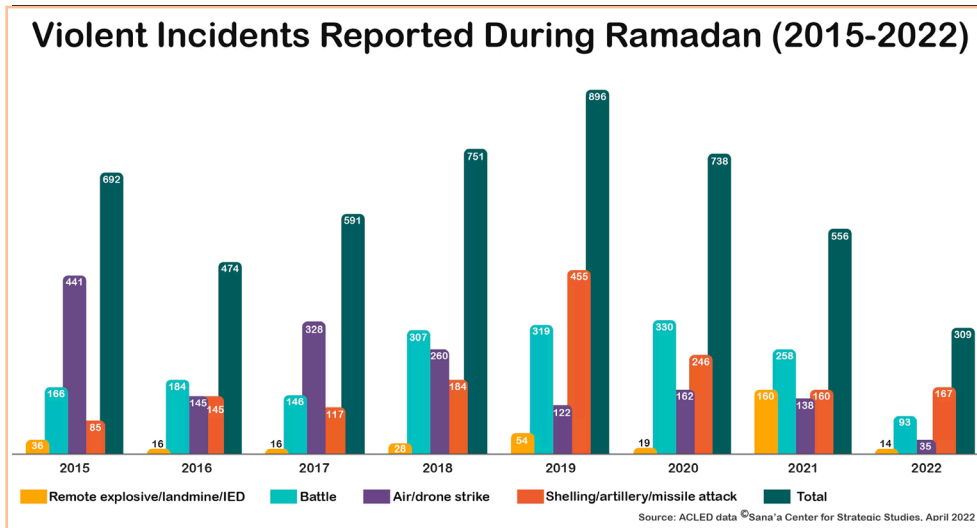
Ramadan Truce Largely Holding

Sana'a Center Staff

Truces of various forms have come and gone in Yemen before. They have rarely lasted or been respected by the parties to the conflict, and sometimes have ended before even having begun. However, when a two-month truce came into effect at 7 p.m. local time on April 2, announced by the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg, there was a sense that this time might be different; that there was a willingness from all sides to stop the fighting, albeit temporarily.

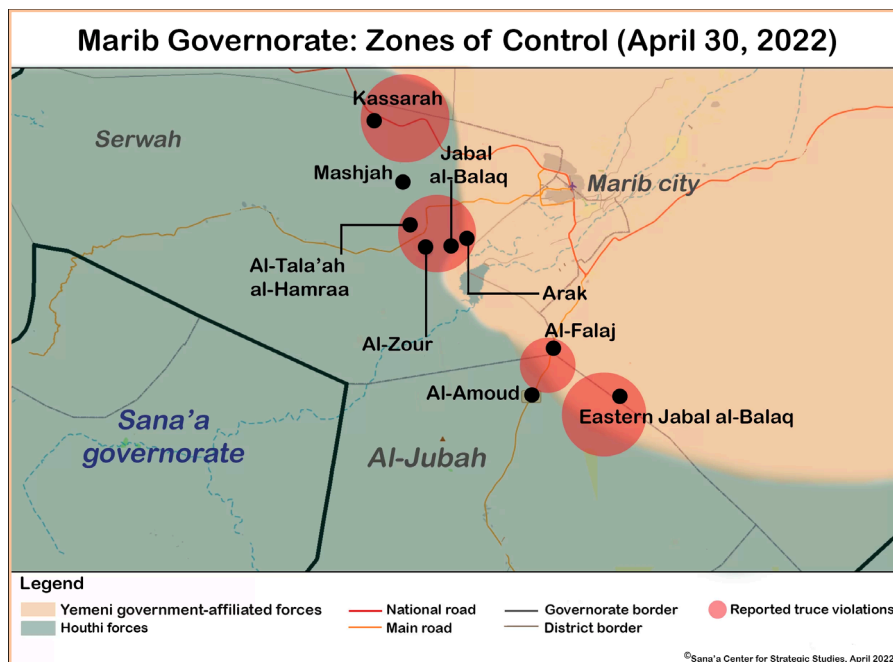
In one sense, that may be true. The first week of April was the first time since the Saudi-led coalition intervened militarily in Yemen in March 2015 that a week went by without airstrikes. The same followed the next week, and the one after that. While the Houthis have accused the Saudis of violating the truce by carrying out cross-border shelling, drone and helicopter attacks, these incidents, which have not been independently verified, would have been relatively minor, resulting in few casualties.^[1] It appears as though the Saudi air force is adhering to the truce.

[1] "Yemen: Yemeni civilians martyred by Saudi gunfire in Sa'ada [AR]," Al-Mayadeen, April 27, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3OCXYTY>



The same cannot be said of the parties to the conflict on the ground, most notably the Houthi forces. Both the Houthis and Yemeni government forces have accused each other of hundreds of violations in areas across Yemen, including shelling, drone attacks and attacks on civilians. While some of the reports are most likely the result of an eagerness to demonstrate that the other side is violating the truce, or are limited individual actions, events in Marib appear to indicate that the Houthis are trying to take advantage of the lack of Saudi-led coalition airstrikes to obtain battlefield advantages, setting themselves up for any major resumption in fighting once the truce ends, or should it fail.

The primary Marib frontline that saw action in April was in the eastern Jabal Al-Balaq mountains, on the southern outskirts of Marib city, where fighting has been ongoing since last year. There were several reported violations in the area, where government positions mark the last major defensive barrier for the Houthis outside Marib city. On April 4 and April 11,^[2] clashes killed several combatants on both sides, according to local media reports.



[2] "30 Houthis dead including leaders in Marib [AR]," Al-Ayyam, April 11, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3rZIM16>

Frontlines in Serwah district, west of Marib city, and Al-Jubah, south of Marib city, also saw fighting, and the Houthis reportedly hit Marib city with missiles on April 9 and 13.^[3]

None of this led to any changes in the frontlines, but critics of the Houthis have pointed out that the group^[4] has in the past taken advantage of truces or reductions in violence to regroup. The presence of new reinforcements in Marib locations such as Al-Tala'a Al-Hamraa, Dhanah and Al-Zour, all west of Marib city, as well as Al-Amoud, south of Marib city, and Al-Alam, in Al-Jawf governorate north of Marib,^[5] indicate that this may once again be the case.

Yemeni government forces also accused the Houthis of multiple violations of the truce in Taiz, where residential areas such as the Bir Basha neighborhood of Taiz city were shelled. On April 13, a woman died after being shot by a Houthi sniper in the Usayfarah district of the city, according to local reports.^[6] For their part, the Houthis accused the Saudis of cross-border shelling^[7] that killed civilians in Sa'ada, as well as the armed drone and helicopter attacks.

One party that has not been involved in the truce in any way is Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). On April 12 there were reports of AQAP deployments in various areas of Abyan, including Khawrah, Merkhah Al-Sufla, Al-Mahfaf, Al-Wadea and Mudiyah. The militants were said to have set up checkpoints and seized a pickup truck from the Giants Brigades.^[8]

On April 14, ten AQAP prisoners escaped from Sayoun's central prison in Wadi Hadramawt,^[9] marking a major breach in government security. One report claimed the prisoners staged a quarrel to lure guards who were then overpowered. But the large number of reported escapees suggests possible coordination with both guards as well as militants outside. AQAP claimed the operation on April 28, saying that it occurred after months of planning.^[10]

On April 28, the Saudi-led coalition announced that it would release 163 Houthi prisoners as part of a humanitarian initiative coordinated with the International Committee of the Red Cross. Coalition spokesperson Turki al-Malki characterized the move as part of de-escalation efforts related to the ongoing truce that aimed to "prepare the atmosphere for dialogue between the Yemeni sides and facilitate closing the prisoners and detainees file."^[11]

[3] "Houthis continue their attacks in Marib and target a camp with ballistic missiles [AR]," Al-Arabiya, April 9, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3OJ3moy>; "Houthi missile fired at a residential neighborhood in Marib [AR]," Al-Mashhad Al-Yemeni, April 13, 2022, <https://almashhadalaraby.com/news/342931>

[4] Fighting rages in Marib despite UN truce," Al Jazeera, April 18, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/18/fighting-rages-in-marib-despite-un-truce>

[5] "Houthi reinforcements surround Marib from three sides [AR]," Al-Muntasaf, April 5, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3knAdRW>

[6] "Houthi sniper targets a woman in Usayfarah, Taiz [AR]," Yemen Today, April 13, 2022, <https://yemendty.tv/news20781.html>

[7] "Yemen: Martyrs and wounded from Saudi shelling in Razih district in Sa'ada governorate [AR]," Al-Mayadeen, April 9, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3MUPvtV>

[8] "Al-Qaeda in Abyan takes a Giants Brigade truck in Al-Khadirah and sets up a checkpoint in Al-Majjala in Abyan [AR]," Al-Jarida Post, April 13, 2022, <https://www.aljaridapost.com/site/2022/04/13/34-47/>

[9] "Ten Al-Qaeda prisoners escape from jail in eastern Yemen," The New Arab, April 15, 2022, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/ten-al-qaeda-prisoners-escape-jail-eastern-yemen>

[10] Dr. Elisabeth Kendall Twitter post, " #AlQaeda in #Yemen claims prison break...," April 29, 2022, https://twitter.com/Dr_E_Kendall/status/1519657741962432515?s=20&t=lZGEV-7YeKvYo8rjQPDmMA

[11] "Yemen: Saudi Arabia to release 163 Houthi prisoners," Al Jazeera, April 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/28/yemen-saudi-arabia-to-release-163-houthi-prisoners>

On April 24, the head of the Houthis' prisoner affairs committee, Abdelqader al-Murtada, had said the group made an offer to the UN for each side in the war to release 200 prisoners ahead of the Eid al-Fitr holiday marking the end of Ramadan.^[12]

Other developments in brief:

- On April 13, the United States Navy announced that it will launch a task force to patrol the Red Sea with allied countries. The move comes after a number of Houthi attacks on vessels in the waterway along Yemen's western coast, although the commander of the navy fleet that will be involved in the patrols refused to name the group.^[13] The Houthis criticized the move, with chief negotiator Mohammed Abdelsalam saying it "enshrined the aggression and blockade on Yemen."^[14]
- A pipeline used to carry gas from Marib to the Balhaf LNG terminal on the Arabian Sea coast was reportedly attacked in Shabwa's Mayfa'a district on April 24, causing an explosion.^[15] The pipeline has not been operational since Yemen's LNG company shut down the plant after the Saudi-led coalition intervention in 2015.

[12] "Yemen's Houthis offer to release 200 prisoners ahead of Muslim's Eid al-Fitr," Middle East Monitor, April 25, 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220425-yemens-houthis-offer-to-release-200-prisoners-before-muslims-eid-al-fitr/>

[13] "US Navy says new task force to patrol Red Sea amid Yemen war," Associated Press, April 13, 2022, <https://bit.ly/36XyJL7>

[14] "Yemen's rebels criticize new, US-led task force in Red Sea," Associated Press, April 16, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/business-middle-east-yemen-iran-red-sea-96db4ef5f3eb77ecao3950832399b08f>

[15] "Unknown gunmen target Safer-Balhaf gas pipeline in Mayfa'ah district in Shabwah governorate [AR]," Al-Masdar Online, April 25, 2022, <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/250548>



A man buys khmer bread, which is popular during Ramadan, at the Bab Musa market in Taiz city on April 9, 2022. //Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

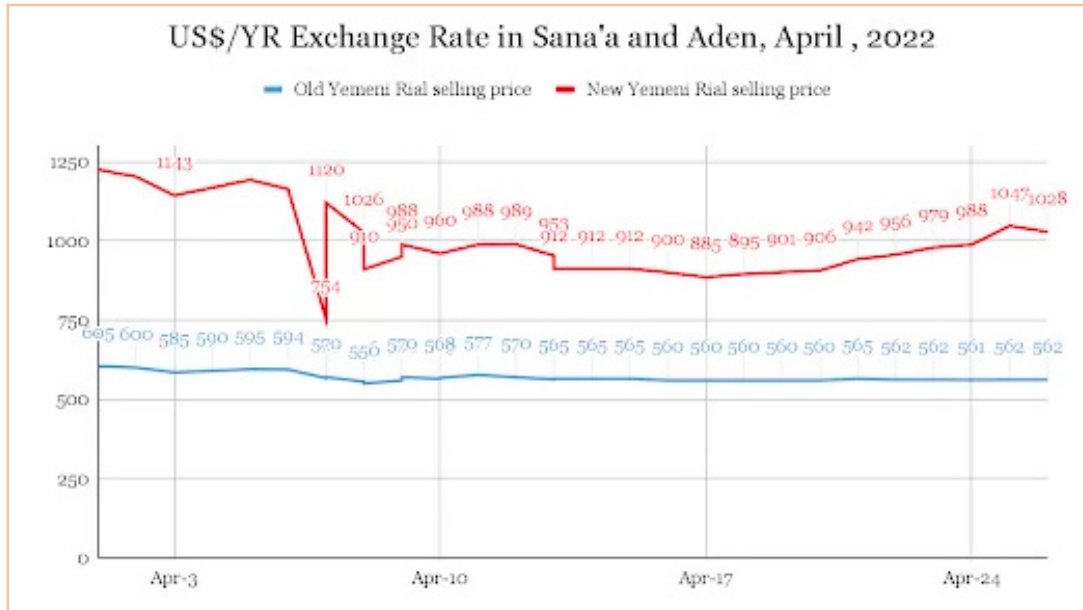
Saudi and Emirati Financial Support Buoy Yemeni Rial

Sana'a Center Economic Unit

On April 7, Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced US\$1 billion each in new financial support for the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden, with Riyadh pledging a further US\$1 billion to support development projects and fund fuel imports in government-held areas. The announcement was among the outcomes of the Riyadh consultations, and reaction in the Yemeni currency market was immediate and dramatic.

In Aden, where 'new' rials — issued by the CBY-Aden since 2017 — are predominately in circulation, wild swings in the exchange rate followed the announcement. Within the first day, the currency regained as much as 40 percent in value relative to the United States dollar before rapidly shedding much of these gains. Anecdotal evidence suggests that currency speculation magnified this volatility, with many exchange outlets setting their sell price for foreign currency far higher than their buy price and often refusing to sell foreign currency at all during this period — a strong indication that they expected the rial's value to drop again, which would allow them to profit from arbitrage. This extreme volatility subsided somewhat in the days following. In Aden, the rial began April valued at close to YR1250 per US\$1, but strengthened to YR885 by April 17, before losing ground again and closing the month trading around YR1,000 per US\$1

In Sana'a, where the Houthi authorities have **enforced a strict ban** on the circulation of new rials and heavily regulated the exchange rate for 'old' rials, the currency volatility was far less pronounced. However, that the exchange rate shifted at all was significant, as old rials have been trading in a narrow band around YR600 per US\$1 since November 2019. In the day following the Saudi and Emirati announcement, old rials gained as much as 16 percent before retreating slightly, and by mid-month the exchange rate had stabilized in a narrow band between YR560 and YR565 per US\$1.



Saudi financial support for the CBY-Aden in 2018, totaling more than \$2.2 billion, similarly led to exchange rate recovery and stability and had broad impacts across the economy in terms of lowering commodity prices, which in turn had broadly positive implications for Yemen's dire humanitarian situation. The CBY-Aden had expended most of this support by early 2020, following which the rial's value in government-controlled areas entered a period of steady decline interspersed with periods of high volatility, which adversely affected not just the humanitarian situation, but political and social stability.

The rial's rising value in April reflected that currency traders anticipate that the CBY-Aden will shortly regain the ability to make large interventions in the foreign currency market, which would ease downward pressure on the value of the rial. Notably, however, the relatively small currency auctions the CBY-Aden held for commercial banks on April 5, 12 and 18, using the [Refinitiv platform](#), were heavily undersubscribed, with the central bank selling roughly 21 percent of the US\$60 million on offer. Banks' reluctance to buy foreign currency in April was likely due to the large exchange rate fluctuations. For instance, during the latter two auctions, the announced price for a dollar, YR950, was close to or higher than the price in the parallel market.

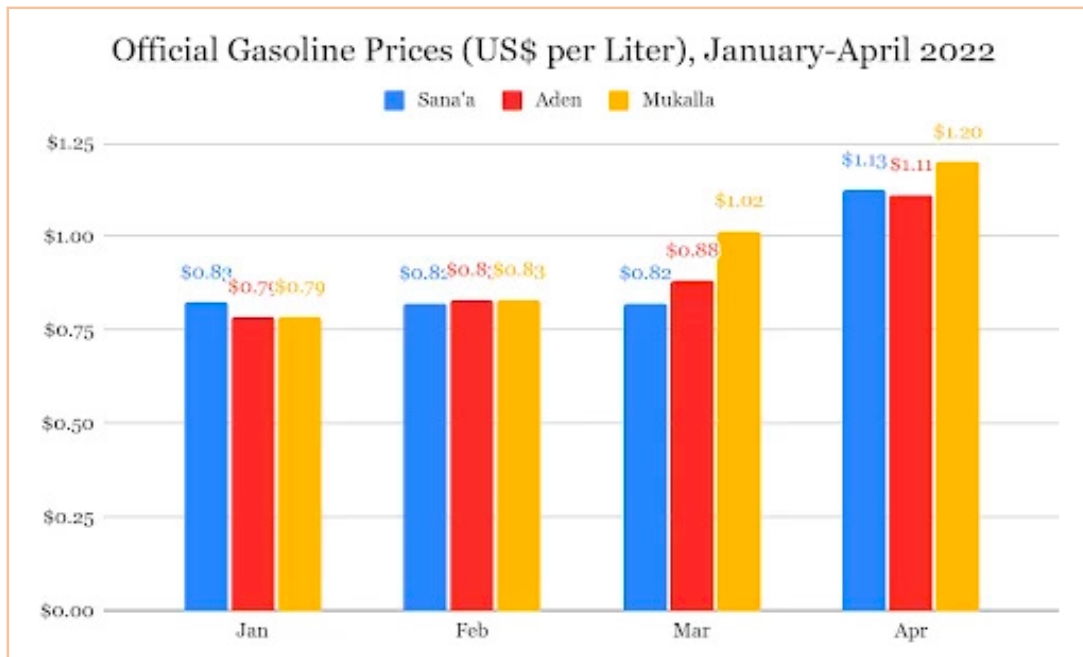
Saudi and Emirati financial support comes as the international relief effort for Yemen is facing a massive funding shortfall for 2022 – it was [less than 40 percent funded](#) at the time of the announcement – which has led to [widespread cuts](#) in food and aid deliveries.

Truce Eases Fuel Supply Crisis, Retail Prices Increase

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg's [announcement](#) of a two-month truce on April 2 contained terms for allowing 18 fuel ships to dock and offload at the Houthi-held port of Hudaydah. Houthi authorities had blamed the Yemeni government policy of redirecting fuel shipments through government-held ports for a [fuel crisis](#) that had persisted since January. Following the announcement, fuel became widely available again at official gas stations, with the Yemeni government [confirming](#) seven fuel ships offloaded at Hudaydah in April.

Despite the increased fuel supply, Houthi authorities in Sana'a upped the official price of gasoline 27.3 percent on April 10, from YR495 to YR630 per liter, while the same quantity on the black market was selling for YR850 (all prices in **old rials**). Similarly, the Houthi-run Ministry of Electricity **raised commercial rates** roughly 28 percent on April 9, from YR300 to YR420 per kilowatt-hour. At a **press conference** announcing the price increase, executive manager of the Houthi-controlled Yemen Petroleum Company (YPC) in Sana'a, Ammar al-Adhrai, justified the move as reflecting the "actual cost" of the fuel. However, given that the rial appreciated roughly 7 percent in April, the effective price increase and commensurate revenue for the Houthi authorities was slightly higher.

By contrast, authorities in areas under the nominal control of the internationally recognized government moved to decrease the price of gasoline in April. The YPC in Aden **announced** a 16 percent drop, from YR1,110 to YR930, while in Hadramawt authorities **decreased** prices almost 15.5 percent, from YR1,278 to YR1,000 per liter (all prices in new rials). Both attributed the moves as being in response to April's exchange rate improvement, though the price changes were not completely in line with the rial's changing value. When measured in US dollars, however, consumers in government held areas were paying roughly 5 percent more for gasoline at the end of April than they were at the beginning.



Shortages of Diesel and Cooking Gas Continue in Houthi Controlled-Areas

Despite the YPC in Sana'a announcing the end of the fuel crisis in April, shortages of diesel and cooking gas continued at official outlets. Both were generally more available on the black market, but at a significant markup. Officially, the price of diesel stood at YR870 per liter in April, though those seeking to actually purchase it paid between YR1,000 and YR1,200 on the black market (all prices in old rials). The price per cylinder of cooking gas on the black market decreased in April, however, to YR13,000 from YR20,000 per cylinder in March.

By contrast, in both Aden and Hadramawt authorities **decreased** the official price roughly 13 percent, from YR1,150 to YR1,000 per liter (prices in new rials).

Yemeni Government Announces New Budget

The Yemeni government approved the public budget for 2022 in the latter half of April. Total estimated public spending in the budget is YR3.65 trillion and estimated revenues stand at YR3.24 trillion, entailing an estimated budget deficit of YR410 billion. Importantly, the budget's revenue estimates assume the government will resume large-scale oil and gas exports this year, which is far from certain.

Other Economic Developments in Brief:

- **April 7:** The International Organization for Migration (IOM) **stated** that in March 2022 it had recorded 7,344 Yemeni expatriates returning from Saudi Arabia without travel documents and 263 returning with travel documents. In total, the IOM recorded some 18,000 returnees from Saudi Arabia in the first three months of 2022.
- **April 19:** The CBY-Aden Governor Ahmed Ghaleb and central bank senior staff met with representatives from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. According to a CBY-Aden **press release**, topics discussed at the meeting included Yemen's general economic situation, the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on commodity and fuel prices, technical support for the CBY-Aden to optimize its use of the recent Saudi and Emirati financial support and structural reforms and steps to achieve and maintain financial stability.
- **April 19:** The head of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) **Rashad al-Alimi** confirmed the council's commitment to addressing key economic issues, such as salary payments for public service, stabilizing the national currency and optimizing public revenue collection.



A member of the Tihama Resistance forces removes landmines April 17, 2022, planted by Houthi forces in an agricultural area of Al-Denien, Al-Khawkhah district, in southern Hudaydah governorate. //Sana'a Center Photo by Anwar Al-Shareef

Death From Beneath: Landmines in Hudaydah

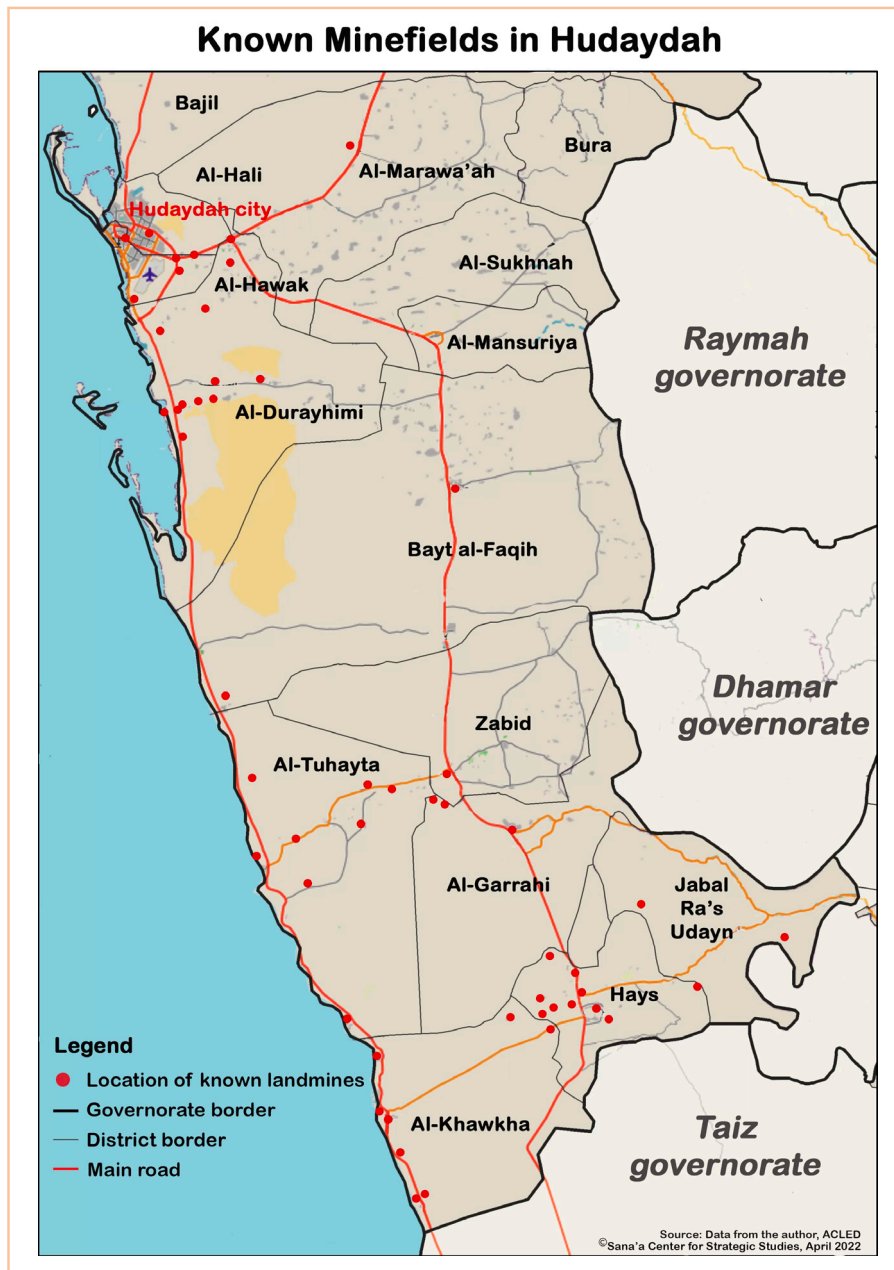
Sam Ali

On a Sunday night more than three years ago, Rawan, 15, was squeezed onto a motorcycle with her sister and two brothers as their father, Abdulbari Yahyah Farea, sped them away from fighting near their home by Hudaydah airport. The motorcycle struck a landmine, with the explosion killing Rawan's father and two brothers, 3 and 8, instantly. Rawan was slightly injured and tried to drag her severely wounded sister, Hanan, 10, to relative safety. Rawan spent the next 12 hours on the phone with UN aid workers, who provided first aid guidance until her phone battery died. Hanan was still losing blood. UN officials eventually got an ambulance to the girls, following extensive calls to Houthi authorities in Sana'a and the Saudi-led coalition in Riyadh.

Hanan died in hospital; Rawan now lives with her grandparents. Her uncle, who relayed the events of June 2018, said the family is doing everything it can to help Rawan move on and live her life. "It has been a very traumatic experience for her," he said. "Losing your father, all your brothers and sister all at once and in that way is something that no one can just put up with or leave behind."

Frontlines finally shifted away from Yemen's Red Sea city of Hudaydah late last year, but residents of the city's sprawling eastern and southern outskirts remain surrounded by the thousands of landmines planted since mid-2017, which, according to [ACLED data](#), have killed at least 832 people since then. During most of that time, only one road out of the city of roughly 700,000 was open, but when government-allied forces [pulled back](#) in November 2021, Houthi forces fanned out and reopened roads in areas that had been largely abandoned when the war closed in. More tragic explosions followed.

Among those reported thus far this year, a landmine **killed brothers Abdo and Ali Deedo in January, when they went to inspect the** Yemen Oil Company's gas storage facility 10 kilometers east of Hudaydah city, which was shut down during fighting in 2018. On arriving, one brother stepped on a mine; both were killed and a third worker was critically injured. In March, five relatives **died when the pickup truck they were riding in** struck a landmine in the same area, and, four days later on March 20, a young couple and their 4-year-old daughter were **injured by a mine** in the Kadah area of the southern district of Al-Khawkhah. On April 11, Mohammed Aqlan, a member of the Hudaydah Traffic Police, returned from years of displacement to check his house on the city's northern outskirts; he stepped on a **mine**, losing one leg and severely fracturing the other.



Digging In and Planting Mines

Houthi forces were entrenching their defensive positions on the southern outskirts of Hudaydah in June 2018 as forces backed by the Saudi-led coalition were advancing on the city to retake it. Thousands of families were packing up and leaving Hudaydah city to seek safety elsewhere. Streets were blocked as trenches and roadside barriers went up; businesses shut down and most recreational activities came to a halt. The Joint Forces, a cluster of government armed forces and local resistance fighters backed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, aimed to retake the key port city – then Yemen’s busiest gateway for commercial imports and humanitarian aid.

By the time the Joint Forces **reached** the outskirts of Hudaydah city, fighting had already consumed not only Al-Tuhayta area, about 120 kilometers south of Hudaydah city, but also southern Hudaydah districts including Al-Durayhimi, Al-Khawkhah and Hays. On December 13, 2018, the warring parties signed the UN-brokered **Stockholm Agreement**, which included a cease-fire agreement in Hudaydah city and its three seaports as well as plans to demilitarize the city through redeployment of the warring parties. The redeployment, however, never fully materialized. And in southern Hudaydah, continued fighting forced many families to flee, sometimes multiple times, as frontlines shifted. Today, large swathes of land remain littered with combatants’ mines and unexploded abandoned shells. Demining teams are active in southern Hudaydah, slowly locating, disarming and collecting devices buried in former frontline areas.

While total numbers are not known, either for Hudaydah governorate or nationally, **more than 334,000** explosive devices have been cleared throughout Yemen since mid-2018, according to Project Masam, a Saudi-funded de-mining project. Since then, Masam, working with the Yemen Executive Mine Action Center (YEMAC), have reported **clearing** 4,960 anti-personnel mines, 123,355 anti-tank mines, 7,345 Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and 198,400 pieces of Unexploded Ordnance (UXO).



A member of the Tihama Resistance forces disables an anti-tank mine April 17, 2022, in an agricultural area of Al-Denien, Al-Khawkhah district, in southern Hudaydah governorate. //Sana'a Center photo by Anwar Al-Shareef

Landmines as a Neighborhood Menace

Several residents of Hudaydah city, including in the heavily mined eastern and southern outskirts where so many industrial plants, family-owned plantations and animal farms shut down or moved during the fighting, spoke of watching the Houthis lay mines in and near their neighborhoods in recent years. “There are no warning signs,” said a 37-year-old resident of Al-Rabasa neighborhood, on the eastern edge of the city, adding that residents were only told to avoid certain areas.

On the south side of Hudaydah city, Houthi forces mined roadside barriers. “You see those big (40-foot/12-meter shipping) containers? They were filled up with sand and mines,” said one resident who asked not to be named, fearing reprisals. “We were simply told not to come near any of them.” Only recently have several of the containers been removed along the city’s eastern and southern edges.

Even the northern city perimeter, where the only entry and exit point for the city was located, remained infested with mines in anticipation of Joint Forces activity. Barbed wire was put up on roadside barriers there; landmines have exploded behind it.

Outside the port city, Houthi forces laid landmines in southern Hudaydah, particularly in territory they controlled near frontlines just outside Al-Durayhimi district and in several parts of Al-Tuhayta, Al-Khawkhah and Hays. Local residents confirmed seeing some mining activity by government-allied Joint Forces, mostly in areas between Al-Tuhayta and Al-Khawkhah. However, the sheer numbers of mines laid by Houthi forces in the governorate raises compelling questions about their origins. According to a September 2018 Conflict Armament Research (CAR) [report](#), the Houthis have domestically improvised and produced the “vast majority” of landmines in southern Hudaydah. They reportedly seized anti-tank mines and modified them to [explode](#) with only about 10 kilograms of pressure instead of 100 kilograms. Such sensitivity means a young child’s weight could detonate them.

More People on the Move in Mined Areas

From January 2021 to early April 2022, landmines planted by Houthi forces along with unexploded explosive ordnance had killed or wounded [363 civilians](#) in a number of governorates, according to Yemeni Landmine Records, which compiles information on victims of landmines and UXO in the country. Most of these incidents, in which the observatory said 176 people were killed and 187 were wounded, many of them children, occurred in the southern coastal districts of Hudaydah. A cluster of September-October 2021 incidents included:

- In mid-September, [a minivan](#) carrying 15 people exploded, including 11 children – mostly members of one extended family from Al-Khawkhah district. Everyone aboard was injured, many of them seriously.
- In early October, [a pregnant woman](#) stepped on a Houthi-laid mine on the eastern outskirts of Hudaydah city, near the Red Sea Mills. The 35-year-old lost her baby and both of her legs.
- Later in October, a member of a mine-clearing team [was seriously injured](#) while removing landmines in the same area. He lost a leg.

- One week later in Al-Durayhimi, a **motorcycle** carrying two children, ages 12 and 17, and a 60-year-old man, struck a mine, killing all three. A relative of the 12-year-old victim, Hamood Jaber Ayyash, said residents' options are limited to death by landmines or displacement, adding that "living as a displaced person near mined-infested areas is a death sentence in itself."

The Joint Forces' unexpected pullout from around Hudaydah city on November 12 left the Houthis to sweep into these areas. It also prompted a new wave of displaced people, while allowing local residents to move more freely throughout much of Hudaydah governorate. Houthi forces opened all roads leading to Hudaydah city, including those in the heavily mined areas of its eastern and southern perimeter. Although demining efforts are underway, thousands of mines remain hidden beneath the soil.

Al-Durayhimi district, 23 kilometers south of Hudaydah and the epicenter of battles in the governorate, remained largely closed off, with only a handful of families briefly allowed to check on their houses. Some people from Al-Durayhimi, who relocated to neighboring areas, said landmines still litter the district.

"I was allowed to see my house after I spoke with a number of Houthi field supervisors," one person said. "When I opened one of the rooms, I saw it was stacked full with landmines. I just closed it and left the place."

Sam Ali is a Yemen-based freelance journalist who is writing under a pseudonym for security reasons.



A Southern Transitional Council (STC) flag at a military checkpoint in Aden, Yemen, on February 21, 2022// Sana'a Center photo by Sam Tarling

What the New Ruling Council Means for the South

Hussam Radman

Leaders of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) entered the Yemen peace consultations in Riyadh last month optimistic and prepared to effect a structural change in the Yemeni presidency. The STC arrived with a proposal to appoint two deputies to President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi, one from northern Yemen and a second from the south. The aim was twofold. Through the appointment of STC chief Aiderous al-Zubaidi as one of the vice presidents, the STC would strengthen its political influence and attain tacit recognition of its status as chief representative of the south. Secondly, the removal of Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar as Hadi's vice president and the appointment of a figure less inimical to the STC would undermine its nemesis, the Islamist Islah party.

But the outcome of the Riyadh talks came as a surprise, even to the STC, exceeding its hopes in significant ways, but also creating challenges. Hadi, who hails from the south himself, was removed completely, essentially replaced by Rashad al-Alimi, a northerner, who will head an eight-member Presidential Leadership Council. Southern figures were given four seats on the council, and two of the members are considered rivals to the STC. Faraj al-Bahsani, the governor of Hadramawt, has had a strained relationship with Al-Zubaidi of late, due to his support for a federal system and his opposition to the STC's escalatory tactics of the past two years, such as the 2020 declaration of autonomous rule. A second rival is Abdullah al-Alimi, chief of staff of the presidential office under Hadi and a member of Islah, who will try to position himself as Hadi's successor in the ex-president's traditional support base of Abyan and Shabwa. Further, the appointment of Giants Brigades head Abdelrahman al-Muharrami (aka Abou Zaraa), another southerner, redefines the UAE-backed brigades as a political and administrative force independent of the STC, contrary to the STC narrative pushed during the brigades' successful military operations in late December and early January, which saw Houthi forces pushed out of Shabwa.

Still, the STC was able to extract several significant gains in the government revamp. The southern issue has been recognized as an integral issue that must be on the table in future talks, in contrast to past negotiations in which it was postponed for discussion until an agreement on a transitional phase and inclusive political dialogue was reached. Secondly, the principle of north-south parity has been established within the presidency. Al-Zubaidi himself has been given a seat at the table and will have a say over issues concerning not just the south but the whole country. Finally, removing Hadi tilts the balance of power in favor of the south, and the STC in particular, while limiting the room for maneuver for STC challengers such as the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference (HIC), the Southern National Coalition (SNC) and some factions and leaders of the broader southern Hirak (the Southern Movement), which were previously able to check STC power through their ability to bypass Al-Zubaidi by appealing to Hadi as a southerner. With Hadi gone, the STC under Al-Zubaidi is in a stronger position.

The first fruit reaped by the STC in Riyadh was the openness of influential southern leaders to engage in a dialogue that the STC called for in 2019. This leverage brings risks. The STC has been integrated into the structures of power, and it will need to moderate its behavior and language away from revolutionary mobilization for the goal of southern secession. The creation of the new leadership council also means that the government will return to Aden, which will require STC concessions such as implementing the military aspects of the Riyadh Agreement, submitting its armed factions to government control and sharing the political authority it has enjoyed within its Aden stronghold – essentially giving up the policy of *fait accompli* it has been able to pursue since 2019.

Such a taming of the STC would give rivals within the Hirak, such as the movement of prominent secessionist Hasan Ba'um, the opportunity to play the role of populist radical and make the demands for secession previously made by the STC. Other Hirak factions could then follow suit if dialogue with the STC – which is not currently on the table – fails to bring results. While southern groups now have an interest in securing relationships for themselves vis-a-vis the now stronger STC, given the STC's unique ability to represent the south in future negotiations on a national level, the STC can be expected to lean toward what its northern partners on the new council consider a more realistic position in future talks on the question of federalism, which could stir dissent among a popular base hankering for secession. Nevertheless, the STC will consider this an acceptable price for the prize won: an active presence at the negotiation table and a chance to improve living conditions and revitalize state institutions in the southern governorates.

The STC will now need to be more careful, however, about how its actions are received in Riyadh. It will take a huge risk if it uses these sudden, unexpected political gains to revert to its traditional policy of escalation on the ground and assuming sole military authority in the southern governorates. Given current UAE support for the STC, this would threaten the bilateral understanding between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi on how to manage the Yemeni crisis. Saudi Arabia recognizes that the new leadership council gives significant gains to Abu Dhabi and its allies but has accepted this as a consequence worth bearing to get rid of Hadi and his circle and move the situation in Yemen forward. But Riyadh also is capable of bringing the STC's southern rivals together, and could strengthen their hand, if need be, to check the STC's power.

In light of these dynamics, regional rivalry is likely to escalate between the southeastern and southwestern governorates. Currently lacking a strong political base, Al-Bahsani in Hadramawt and Abdullah al-Alimi in Shabwa can be expected to mobilize on the ground as a means to gain influence. Furthermore, various social groups in Hadramawt and Al-Mahra in Yemen's far east will take the opportunity to extract concessions from the new presidency and the STC over regional identity and autonomy in coming dialogues to achieve a political resolution to the ongoing conflict.

Hussam Radman is a researcher fellow with the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. His research focuses on Yemen's Southern Movement and militant Islamist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Islamic State group, and armed Salafist factions.



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

Made in KSA: The Risks of an Imposed Presidential Council

Osamah Al Rawhani

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](#).



A car displays a photo of Presidential Leadership Council head Rashad al-Alimi on Al-Masbah Street in Taiz city on April 19, 2022// Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

Taiz in Power

Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen

For the first time in Yemen's modern history, the executive and legislative branches of the government are headed by figures hailing from the governorate of Taiz. Rashad al-Alimi was appointed head of the new Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) in early April. He joins Prime Minister Maen Abdelmalek Saeed and Speaker of Parliament Sultan al-Barakani – all of them Taizis.

This strong national representation for Taiz at this juncture has important implications given the governorate's unique position in Yemen's history. While Taiz is politically part of north Yemen, geographically and historically it has always been part of the south. Taiz was the capital of Yemen during one of its most prosperous eras in medieval times, under the rule of the **Rasulid Dynasty** (1229-1454). It also served as an alternative capital when rulers in Sana'a gave up hope of building stable alliances with the surrounding Zaidi tribes, such as during the second period of Ottoman rule from **1872 to 1918**.

Taiz was chosen as **the seat of government** during the rule of Imam Ahmad after he thwarted the 1948 coup that killed his father, out of fear of a renewed rebellion by the tribes. It remained so until the republican revolution of 1962, when political power returned to Sana'a. It remained the preferred place of residence of President Abdelrahman al-Eryani, second president of the republic, from 1967-1974. During that time, Taiz city witnessed a political and cultural revival while civil war gripped Sana'a.

Taiz's ties to the south deepened during British colonial rule. The majority of Aden's population primarily originated from areas of Taiz, especially the Al-Hujariah region, creating an important link between the two centers. Aden's political culture played a crucial role in spreading modern education to Taiz, producing local politicians and intellectuals such as Ahmed al-Nu'man, Abdullah Abdelwahab al-Nu'man and Mohammed Qaid Seif, as well as prominent technocrats such as Mohammed An'am Ghaleb, Abdelaziz Abdelghani, Mohammed Said al-Attar and Ahmad Abdu Said. Notable Taizi merchant families also arose during that time, such as the Hayel Said Anam and Mutahhar families.

Residents of Taiz perceived a growing sense of marginalization by northern tribal forces in the 1960s following the republican revolution. The murder of **Taizi military leader Abdelraqib Abdelwahab** during the intra-republican struggle in 1968 was taken by Taizis as a sign of their exclusion. Later, when President Ali Abdullah Saleh began his rise to power, he generally kept Taizi figures out of important military and decision-making positions, despite his previous post as **leader of the Taiz Military Axis**. People like Abdelaziz Abdelghani, who served numerous terms as prime minister, were tokenistic figures in government, while real political and military power lay elsewhere. An early unsuccessful **coup attempt** against Saleh in October 1978 included military and civilian leaders from Taiz's Nasserist party.

In South Yemen, figures from Taiz held some important positions within the state, mainly on the technocratic side. However, military posts in the southern armed forces were mostly distributed to individuals from the governorates of Al-Dhalea, Lahj, Shabwa and Abyan. **Abdelfattah Ismail**, who hailed from Taiz and led the Socialist Party in the south, briefly seized power in 1979, but resigned less than a year later.

Taiz remained a prominent political bellwether after unification. In **December 1992**, protests over deteriorating living conditions broke out in Taiz and spread to other governorates such as Sana'a and Hudaydah. In 2011, the protests that eventually brought down President Saleh began in Taiz, which in many ways became the beating heart of the popular revolt. During the early stages of the current war, the people of Taiz resisted Houthi forces' attempts to take the city, **confronting them with demonstrations**. When the Saudi-led coalition intervened in March 2015, **Taiz became a key battleground**, as the coalition tried to interrupt Houthi supply lines from the north that ran through the governorate.

Taiz governorate is now fractured by competing political forces and militias. The Islah party has gained a strong foothold after routing rival Salafi forces in Taiz city, while the coast has fallen under the control of Tareq Saleh's forces. Northern areas, including the Al-Hawban industrial zone, remain under the control of Houthi forces.

Given the fragmented political and military situation in the governorate, what does the appointment of Rashad al-Alimi mean for Taiz? Both Al-Alimi and Prime Minister **Maeen Abdelmalek** hold doctorates from Egyptian universities. Al-Alimi has held academic and security positions during his career, the most important of which was as minister of the interior in the 2000s, and he is a member of Saleh's General People's Congress party. Maeen Abdelmalek is considered an independent associated with younger figures who attained prominence after the 2011 revolution, partly through his strong personal relationship with current Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak. Meanwhile, **Sultan al-Barakani** was a figure promoted by ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh, eventually becoming a leader in the GPC.

As well as their shared origins, Al-Alimi and Saeed are similar in that they do not have an armed force behind them, nor do they rely on the ideology of armed regionalism, despite the current military divisions in the governorate. A presidential council has been created with its members each representing different armed forces, save for the chairman. Yemenis have previously resorted to such a formula when there was a need for neutral, peaceful

leadership that would put an end – even temporarily – to armed confrontation between the various forces. Such an arrangement existed with the rise of Hadramawt's political influence in South Yemen after the war of 1986, despite the governorate not being a center of armed regionalism. Rather, Hadrami influence was necessary to balance and disengage the rival armed axes of Lahj-Al-Dhalea and Shabwa-Abyan, leading to Ali Salem al-Beidh and Haider al-Attas ascending to power in the south.

The current rise of Taiz is similar to the Hadrami situation, as it represents an unarmed cosmopolitan space that poses a threat to no one, deferring to the struggle for power between other forces. But will this rise in influence eventually lead the city to emerge as a cohesive armed force in itself?

The future of Taiz will be impacted by those figures who now hold office, especially the head of the new ruling council. Their actions could help alleviate the city's division and suffering, or let it continue to fester. Among the worst choices these figures could make, especially Rashad al-Alimi, is to resort to creating patronage networks in Taiz – similar to what ex-presidents Saleh and Hadi did in their home areas of Sanhan and Abyan, respectively – in an effort to protect their position. That path would risk creating new destructive dynamics in a divided city where numerous Yemeni forces have influence on the ground. Fortunately, the city's history and culture suggest it would be difficult for any party to create the strident regionalist politics that exist elsewhere in Yemen.

Maysaa Shuja al-Deen is a senior researcher at Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies. Her writing and analyses have been featured in many media outlets such as Jadaliyya, Assafir al Araby, al Araby al Jadeed, and Al-Monitor.



A woman sells Fatir, a kind of bread popular during the month of Ramadan and used in preparing the popular dish "Fattah", at Al-Bab Al-Kabeer market in Taiz city on April 7, 2022 Taiz.// Sana'a Center photo by Ahmed Al Basha

Economic War Set for Escalation Following Riyadh Consultations

Sana'a Center Economic Unit

The official economic outcomes from the inter-Yemeni consultations in Riyadh in April were flawed, unfinished and of questionable utility from a policy or governance standpoint. What they were useful for, however, was as a bellwether for gauging the intentions of the internationally recognized Yemeni government moving forward, pointing toward a desire for further escalation, rather than armistice, in the economic war that has accompanied the armed conflict with the Houthi movement.

On April 7, hundreds of participants across a broad spectrum of Yemeni society – including politicians, economists, activists and others, though Houthi representatives refused to attend – ended a week-long dialogue in the Saudi capital to discuss Yemen's overall challenges and draw a road map for bringing peace and stability to our war-torn country. Orchestrated by the Gulf Cooperation Council, the most dramatic outcome was President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi issuing a resolution to transfer his executive powers to a newly formed **Presidential Leadership Council (PLC)** led by **Rashad al-Alimi**, that now assumes the political, military, security and economic management of the state. The consultations also saw Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates commit US\$2 billion in financial assistance to the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden (CBY-Aden), with the Saudis pledging another US\$1 billion in development aid and fuel grants.

The fourth article of Hadi's resolution formed an economic team, made up of 14 prominent Yemeni economic thinkers and businesspeople, to offer advice to the PLC on the state's economic and financial issues. Officially, the economic team was assigned to support and

advise the Yemeni government and the CBY-Aden in four primary areas: financial and monetary issues; strengthening efficiency, transparency and integrity in government agencies; sustainable development and economic growth; and finally, working to increase public revenue mobilization and diversify the economic base.

An immediate flaw of the economic committee, however, was that none of its members had been consulted prior to their appointment being announced. Active participation in a partisan entity would have created a severe conflict of interest for many, such as those with nationwide business interests, those affiliated with international institutions, and independent researchers, whose public impartiality in the war is core to their professional lives. Thus, following the announcement of the economic team, eight of its 14 would-be members promptly resigned.

While displaying an embarrassing lack of internal consultation and coordination, the incident was not in itself a mortal wound for the economic team since the article calling for its creation contains a clause allowing for those who resign to be replaced by the head of the PLC. A more fundamental problem is that the team's purpose is framed in broad language that leaves unanswered the question of its mandate and authority – technically, this is meant to be articulated by the legal committee, similarly formed by former President Hadi's April resolution, the head of which also resigned shortly after his appointment. At a time when the Yemeni government is attempting to strengthen its existing institutions and staff them competently – for instance, replacing the governor and most senior staff at the CBY-Aden in December 2021 – it would seem counterproductive to dilute the powers of these institutions and create an institutional power struggle by inventing another government body with purview over the same issues.

By the end of the Riyadh consultations, delegates at the conference had also produced a document listing a broad range of socio-economic challenges facing Yemenis and recommendations for addressing them. The challenges identified would be familiar to those acquainted with Yemen, including currency collapse and inflation, unemployment, lack of government revenues and public spending, and poor electricity and internet services. The causes given for these issues include “division and duplication” in government agencies that lead to “contradictory efforts” to address them, the government's expansionary monetary policy to cover expenses, its lack of foreign currency reserves, its lack of data, impeded transportation networks, import dependence and food insecurity. The solutions proposed are generally broad as well, including: use the Saudi and Emirati financial support to stabilize the domestic currency and stop printing new rials; move all government agencies back to Yemen from abroad; activate oversight mechanisms; “find solutions to the division in some institutions”; create a new telecommunications company, and so on.

Notably, the economic outcomes document only tangentially acknowledged the de facto existence of two central banking structures, dual currency and dual banking systems, and broadly speaking the territorial economic divisions. The economic and monetary war between the Yemeni government and the Houthi authorities was presented as incidental, rather than central, to the country's economic collapse over the course of the war. This is a willful distortion. Houthi authorities wield immense clout over a broad swath of the country's economy. Resolving the nation's most significant economic challenges

will necessarily require government-Houthi negotiations and mutual coordination of nationwide economic policies until a political settlement to the conflict is reached. The economic recommendations formulated at the consultations were narrowly focused to address economic challenges in areas under the control of the newly formed PLC while lacking any comprehensive national-level vision to end the division in key economic institutions – such as the central bank – or address economic hurdles inclusively at a national level. This is not an oversight.

The recommendations were almost wholly taken from a presentation that CBY-Aden staff gave at the Riyadh consultations, according to a senior government official. The official elaborated that since there is currently no appetite among political leaders on the government's side to allow negotiations with the Houthis on economic issues to proceed, the policy is to "fix ourselves" and strengthen the government's hand economically vis-a-vis the Houthis to be better positioned for when negotiations might take place. Escalation of the economic war thus seems nigh, with Houthi authorities certain to retaliate against any unilateral step the government takes to assert itself, and as with all escalations in a war, the first casualties will undoubtedly be the millions of ordinary Yemenis whose ability to attain the basics of life is already precarious.

Even within this reckless, self-serving aim and narrow representation of the country's economic challenges and possible solutions, however, there is a dearth of details as to how the PLC should carry out the recommendations arising from the Riyadh consultations. The devil, as they say, is in the details, and without thorough and realistic blueprints for implementation, these recommendations risk the new Yemeni government leadership instigating a new round of economic confrontations that it won't know how to win.

This issue of the Yemen Review was prepared by (in alphabetical order): Ryan Bailey, Casey Coombs, Ali Al-Dailami, Andrew Hammond, Khadiga Hashim, Abdulghani Al-Iryani, Maged Al-Madhaji, Farea Al-Muslimi, Elham Omar, Spencer Osberg, Ghaidaa Al-Rashidy, Susan Severeid, Maysaa Shuja Al-Deen, Ned Whalley and the Sana'a Center Economic Unit.

