



# The Presidential Council's Year of Failure

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Cover photo: A soldier salutes an image of Rashad al-Alimi, head of Yemen's 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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The May [announcement](#) by Aiderous al-Zubaidi, head of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), that two fellow members from the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) will join the STC, was the final nail in the coffin for the council. The PLC's eight-member body has been divided since its [unnatural creation](#) in April 2022, but this latest disruption to the delicate balance of power — three members now sharing STC interests — signals a rift the council cannot recover from. The relationship between the STC and PLC has devolved into an unchecked rivalry, as the former calls for an independent southern state in a direct challenge to the latter's authority. In just over a year, Yemen's top executive political body has become paralyzed by severe divisions that will likely lead to its disintegration.

Power-sharing offers a tempting alternative to executive rule in Yemen. Hypothetically, an executive council would prevent autocratic leadership by creating a structured and transparent process for decision-making. But sharing political power across Yemen's diverse constituencies has never been easy. Attempts at building coalitions, councils, and power-sharing among different parties in the past led to [a series of incompetent and failed governments](#), resulting in escalating tensions, deeper divisions, and the eruption of conflict. Nearly all presidential councils in Yemen, since the first executive council formed after the overthrow of the Imamate in 1962 until today, have suffered from a lack of clarity. Yemen's coalition governments have fared no better, and often have no mandate, no mechanism for accountability, no definition of member duties, and no limits to members' authority. The last experiment in power-sharing ended with Yemen's 1994 civil war. By the end of that conflict, it was clear that the council that sought to divide authority after the unification of Yemen would never truly share presidential power, a common theme in the country's history. For several years, President Ali Abdullah Saleh had sole authority over decision-making in Yemen. This was followed by a tense coalition between Saleh's General People's Congress and the Islah party, which continued until the 1997 elections, when the Islah party completely withdrew from the government. The current war began after the failure of two coalition governments, under Prime Minister Mohammed Basindawah from 2011-2014, and Prime Minister Khaled Bahah from 2014-2016.

The PLC is only the most recent example of an unsuccessful attempt at power-sharing. It was proposed in 2022 as part of a comprehensive vision to reform Yemen's government by addressing two main problems. First, the issue of representation: the House of Representatives was last elected in 2003 and no longer represents the current political landscape, which has been completely reshaped by the war. Second, the former system of government didn't clearly allocate power and responsibility. The prime minister should have the power to form their government, choose ministers, and consequently bear responsibility

for the government's performance. The PLC was envisioned as a political body that would play a role close to that of the House of Representatives, bringing together Yemen's main anti-Houthi parties to oversee the performance of a wartime government led by a consensus prime minister. Compared with the pre-war arrangement, this would theoretically expand the powers of the prime minister and reduce the executive authority of the Presidency. But this is not what happened in reality.

## An Inauspicious Start

Instead, when the PLC was announced in April 2022, it quickly became clear that it was part of a rather blunt initiative to remove President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi from office rather than an effort at reforming the government. The process was coordinated by the Saudis and Emiratis without sufficient preparations or adequate involvement of Yemenis across the political spectrum. Both countries selected political actors who would advocate Saudi or Emirati interests. Chairman Rashad al-Alimi is a former interior minister and a trusted ally of Saudi Arabia. Other Saudi-backed members are Marib Governor Sultan al-Aradah, Hadi's former Chief of Staff Abdullah al-Alimi, and Member of Parliament Othman al-Majali. The UAE's allies on the council are STC President Aiderous al-Zubaidi, National Resistance forces leader Tareq Saleh; and Giants Brigades Commander Abdelrahman "Abou Zaraa" al-Mahrami. Former Hadramawt Governor Faraj al-Bahsani has vacillated between the Saudi and Emirati camps based on his personal interests.

The council's political structure was announced in an official [statement](#) issued from Riyadh. The plan was to transfer power to the council while also establishing four supporting political bodies. The Legal Committee would define the council's frameworks; the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission would resolve disputes; the Economic Committee would assist in economic decision-making; and the Military and Security Committee would unify the anti-Houthi armed factions. Each failed in their own way.

The Economic Committee has held only irregular meetings since its formation and has seen several members resign from the body. The Military and Security Committee has met several times and one of its main mandates – the establishment of a joint operations room to unify the command of all anti-Houthi armed groups under the Ministry of Defense – was [approved](#) by Al-Alimi in May. However, in reality this is a formality on paper, and on the ground the committee has limited success convincing armed forces to better work together and coordinate efforts. Similarly, the Legal Committee has produced nothing functional. According to the statement which created the council, the Legal Committee was tasked with issuing regulations for the PLC within 15 days. However, its chairman quickly resigned, and the council didn't convene until after the deadline had passed. They finally [issued a draft](#) of regulations for the council in late May 2022. This draft was never approved because it was immediately vetoed by the STC, represented by Al-Zubaidi. According to Salem al-Awlaqi, head of the STC-affiliated National Media Authority for the South, the group justified its [objection](#) by claiming that the second chairman of the Legal Committee, Hamoud al-Hattar, was appointed without the full consent of the council, and that the document granted chairman Rashad al-Alimi powers beyond those granted to him by the declaration that formed the council.

There may have been other reasons behind the STC's rejection of the draft regulations. A Yemeni politician aware of the council's work, and who was granted anonymity in order to speak freely, said that the STC blocked passage of the regulations because two of its own proposals were dismissed: the appointment of a first deputy in the PLC, which would clearly designate a second in command after the chairman; and the annual rotation of the positions of council chairman and first deputy between representatives from the north and the south. These proposals, which were clearly aimed at further empowering Al-Zubaidi, were rejected by the other members of the council.

The Consultation and Reconciliation Commission never got off the ground; most members were purely political appointees, mirroring the divisions present in the PLC. This body also had a near-impossible task: stitching together the fragmented factions of the PLC. The clear lack of harmony has been evident since the PLC's swearing-in when Al-Zubaidi decided to *skip the constitutional oath and omit the phrase "Yemen's unity"*.

Finally, the council lacks any claim to legitimately represent Yemen, as its formation was negotiated without Yemeni participation. Over time, regional divisions have deepened the divisions within the council, which operates without effective leadership or clear rules for operation. This is further compounded by shifting power imbalances among armed forces, complicated rivalries, and conflicting agendas. For example, the STC and Al-Mahrami share an opposition to the Islah party, which Abdullah al-Alimi is a member of and Sultan Al-Aradah is allied with. Disagreements between council members have become so acrimonious that the council has become incapable of holding regular meetings. The council has not even brought the illusion of coordination to the anti-Houthi camp. Since its formation, divisions within this camp have deepened, and negotiations with the Houthis have been conducted separately and directly by the Saudis, completely ignoring the council's existence. Furthermore, the council has failed to improve living standards and reform state institutions. Corruption remains rampant, and appointments continue to be based on regional affiliations and cronyism.

## Divided Rule

Al-Zubaidi's military control over the interim capital of Aden positioned him as the biggest winner within this new power-sharing agreement and undercut the authority of PLC chief Al-Alimi. In practice, Al-Zubaidi held the reins of power. According to two senior government officials, most of Al-Alimi's appointments were actually selected by Al-Zubaidi, ensuring STC control over vital government institutions. This included positions such as the Attorney General, and the heads of the Supreme Judicial Council, Tax Authority, Yemen Oil and Gas Corporation, and Yemen Oil Refining Company, among others.

Al-Alimi generally adopted two approaches when faced with the council members' competing priorities. One was submission, making major concessions to avoid confrontation. Al-Alimi chose not to respond when STC-affiliated forces expanded into Shabwa and Abyan. But this only encouraged increased demands from the STC. The other approach was to quietly seed discord within the council. Al-Alimi attempted to form an alliance with Abou Zaraa – the commander of the Giants Brigades commander, the largest military force within the council and the south – to check Al-Zubaidi's power. This approach failed spectacularly. When STC and Islah-affiliated forces battled for control of Shabwa in August 2022, the balance was tipped in favor of the STC after the Giants Brigades intervened under Emirati orders, despite the tense personal relationship between Al-Zubaidi and Al-Mahrami.

Al-Alimi's lack of power can be attributed to several factors: first, until recently, he had no armed forces loyal to him. Saudi Arabia attempted to remedy this with the creation of the Nation's Shield forces to bolster Al-Alimi's authority. Second, Al-Alimi is from the north and seeks a unified Yemen, even though Aden and much of the south are controlled by separatist forces. This weakness has only been further compounded by Al-Alimi's aversion to confrontation and inability to assert his authority. Generally, he lacks a vision for Yemen's government and is unable to confront Al-Zubaidi, who holds control over Aden. However, Al-Zubaidi also cannot harm Al-Alimi or prevent him from living in the interim capital, as that would result in a direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia that Al-Zubaidi wants to avoid. It would have been better if Al-Alimi had exercised his authority from another governorate outside STC control, for instance, Marib, Hadramawt, or Al-Mahra. However, he chose the easiest and worst option: to spend most of his time outside Yemen and make short, sporadic visits to Aden.

Al-Alimi's policies of being absent from Aden, appeasing the STC, and attempting to manipulate feuds between council members have not succeeded. Instead, Al-Alimi has become a chairman without power and may be the weakest leader in Yemen's modern history. The council may not recover from the STC's recent recruitment of two members from the PLC to the STC: Al-Mahrami and Al-Bahsani (the latter has allied himself with Al-Zubaidi after Al-Alimi dismissed him from his position as governor of Hadramawt in August 2022). The worsening tension between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, a side effect of the PLC's formation and the removal of former president Hadi, a powerful actor in the south, and the expansion of Emirati influence in southern Yemen, also bodes poorly for the future of the executive body.

## What the Government Should Do

The council likely cannot be resuscitated, but attempts at reviving it would need to begin with a clear agreement on Yemen's unity. This would require building a consensus on the south's administrative and political status, including areas outside STC control such as Hadramawt and Al-Mahra. Second, oversight and accountability entities must be operationalized and linked to a judicial process that is impartial, independent, and transparent, allowing for societal and media oversight. These entities include the Ministry of Civil Service and Insurance which is responsible for appointments to state institutions, the Central Organization for Control and Accountability (COCA), and the Supreme National Authority for Combating Corruption. Third, clear regulations for the council must be adopted. Fourth, a technocratic cabinet made up of ministers appointed by a consensus prime minister should be formed. Finally, council members' access to financial resources must be limited. Resources must be controlled by the prime minister, with transparency and oversight from COCA, to prevent the consolidation of military and financial power in the hands of any single party. While these steps are not a panacea for Yemen's problems, reforming and improving the function of the PLC and the Yemeni government remains a pressing need and the country's best hope for reversing its economic decline, and ensuring a strong negotiating position to push for a comprehensive, sustainable and just political settlement to the conflict.



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