



May 3, 2022

What the New Ruling Council Means for the South

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Cover Photo:

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

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.

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