

Institutional Prerequisites for the STC “Coup” in Aden and Perspectives on the Jeddah Deal

Peace talks between Yemen’s internationally recognized government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) facilitated by Saudi Arabia in Jeddah are said to be on the verge of a breakthrough. Saudi Arabia is said to become the monitor of the agreement’s implementation and has already taken control of vital infrastructure in southern Yemen, including the airport and port of Aden. The Kingdom invited the negotiating parties to talks in August 2019, after the STC had pushed Saudi’s ally, the government of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, out of the interim capital of Aden earlier that month. For the STC, the move was another step toward restoring southern independence. By the same token, it represented an enormous blow to the internationally recognized government and its position as “legitimate” representative of a unified Yemeni state. The “coup” became possible after the STC and its sympathizers had come to dominate United Arab Emirates (UAE)-supported security institutions. With UAE troops currently being replaced by pro-unity Saudi troops, the STC’s ability to assert itself politically and militarily has been curtailed. Yet, the STC will hold onto its long-term goal of seeking independence, and it will attempt to do so through the security sector institutions that the southern movement has gained influence over since 2015.

The STC and Its Roots in the Southern Resistance Forces

Before the STC pushed the Hadi government out of Aden, it already controlled most of the city, and it played an influential role in security institutions in Aden and neighboring governorates. Despite such informal power, the STC did not have official access to state resources or control over vital infrastructure. While members and sympathizers of the STC held formal positions, they were not recognized as such.

The STC was founded in May 2017 by southern movement leader Aideroos al-Zubaidi after he had been sacked by President Hadi as governor of Aden. Unifying different factions of the southern movement, the council was to act as a quasi-government of what it hoped in the future to be an independent south. The establishment of the council was the result of President Hadi empowering southern leaders since 2015, while at the same time ignoring their demands for independence. Despite his southern origins, President Hadi has been viewed as representing the northern elite and as having abandoned the south to fend for itself. When Ansarallah was pushed out of Aden in July 2015, not only had state structures collapsed, but President Hadi had lost his standing in the city. To gain leverage on the ground, the president had to build on the paramilitary formation of the Southern Resistance Forces (SRF) by integrating some of its troops into the National Army.

The SRF refer to a collective of informal groups of fighters of diverse social and political backgrounds that emerged in an ad hoc manner as a result of the collapse of state institutions in Aden. Loyalists of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in police and military supported the Ansarallah incursion in spring 2015, and

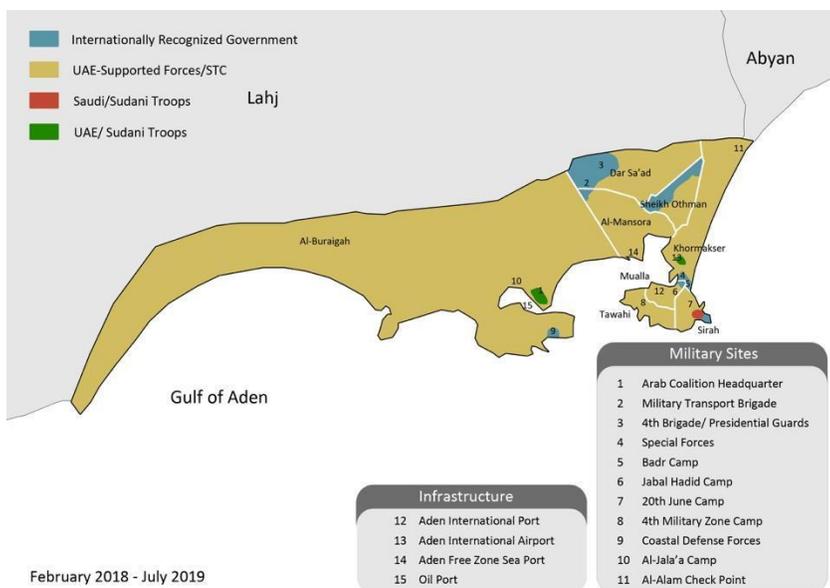
refused to follow the orders of President Hadi. At the helm of the pro-Ansarallah forces in Aden stood Chief of the Special Security Forces in Aden (formerly Central Security Forces) Abdulhafez al-Saqqaf, who was accused of planning a coup against President Hadi. Most military camps surrendered their arms to Ansarallah; police collapsed completely.

In the fall of 2015, security institutions were (re)built with support from the UAE. During the process of (re)building, sympathizers of the southern movement rose from within the ranks of the state and began to dominate newly established security structures. Formerly marginalized southerners were now integrated on a scale never seen before. This included southern military officers forcibly retired under former President Saleh who had taken leadership positions within the SRF. This was a consequence of the UAE's choice to cooperate with salafi and southern movement elements within the SRF rather than with al-Islah, which the UAE views as a terrorist organization, though al-Islah acts as a partner to Hadi's government elsewhere.

Eventually, a complex relationship emerged between Hadi's government and the STC along with its sympathizers in the southern movement, both sides representing two contradictory positions with regard to the Yemeni state. Despite competition between the two, the STC and its sympathizers became Hadi's door to Aden and its surrounding areas. Hadi even included individuals sympathetic to the southern movement in leadership positions as long as they didn't cross red lines, such as calling for southern independence or publicly pledging allegiance to the STC. Subsequently, the southern movement sympathizers used their positions to further the political interests of the movement.

STC Security Structures and Territorial Control

Although formally under the hierarchy of the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and the Ministry of Defense (MoD),



various UAE-established security institutions, as well as the police in Aden and al-Dhale', act as the STC's military and security apparatus. The STC refers to these groups as the Southern Forces (SF). This was possible because security institutions emerged that were completely detached from the old elite, the northern tribal-military complex. Cooperating with southern local agents, the UAE established, equipped and trained the Security Belt Forces, the Counter Terrorism Force and the Support and Backup Brigades over the past few years; all concentrated in southern governorates. The police in

Aden and its neighboring governorates likewise received vehicles, arms and training from the UAE.

As a consequence of these competing political dynamics, a security sector ridden with confusing hierarchies and orders of command emerged in Aden. Before the events of August 2019, Aden Security Chief Shallal Ali Shaya, an STC loyalist, reported to the UAE and the MoI at the same time. Informal conversations that the authors had with various commanders from the UAE-backed Support and Backup Brigades in April 2019 revealed their confusion as to whether they should follow the MoD or the Saudi-led Arab Coalition. The Aden deputy security chief explained in an interview with YPC that there was no standard joint operation room in Aden, which could have allowed coordination between the UAE-backed forces and the ministries of the internationally recognized government.

In January 2018, the STC, exploiting the might of the SF, made a series of tactical advances, seizing one government position after another. After Saudi mediation, the fighting stopped before the SF reached the Presidential Palace, symbolic of Hadi's position as president in the interim capital. Although the STC stepped back, the council was successful in demonstrating its new power and since, has presented itself as a counterpart to the Hadi government.

The Final Straw: The STC Demands Recognition

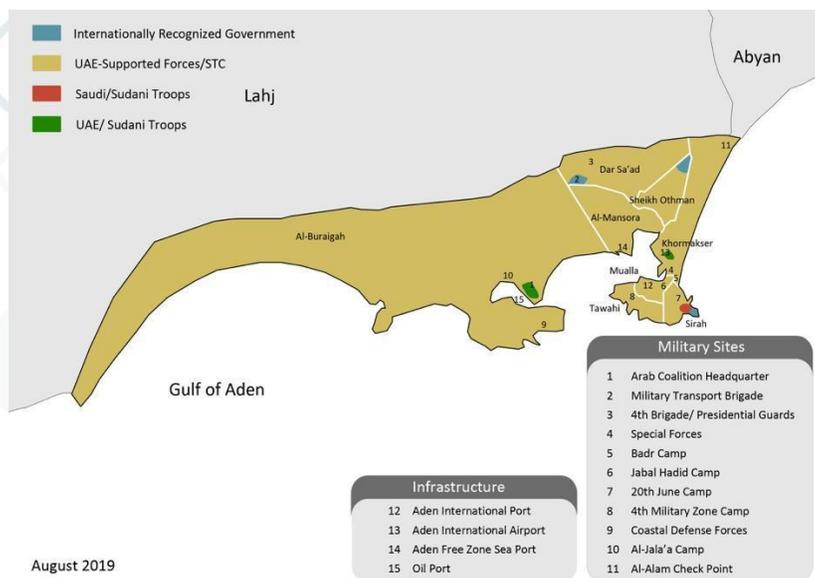
In the summer of 2019, a series of events brought the simmering tension between the Hadi government and the STC to an open conflict, with the STC striving for what it lacked despite its growing influence: recognition. The ensuing battles led to the STC expelling the Hadi government from its interim capital, the STC taking full control of Aden and the STC's attempt at seizing territory in Abyan and Shabwa.

Different factors had motivated the STC to act. First, after the death of popular military leader Munir al-Mashali (aka Abu Yamama) in a missile attack on a military parade in Aden on August 1, STC supporters staged protests demanding that the STC take action. The circumstances of the missile attack, although claimed by Ansarallah, remained murky. The missile coincided with a suicide attack at an Aden police station claimed by ISIS, raising further suspicion, especially after Hani bin Breik, the STC vice president, publicly accused al-Islah elements within the Hadi government of being responsible for the attack.¹

Additionally, the STC had felt cornered and had acted to defend its position in the city. A month earlier, the announcement that the UAE would be withdrawing troops was followed by Saudi troops arriving in Aden. Around the same time, Yemeni Minister of Interior Ahmed bin Ahmed al-Maisari met in Riyadh with the Commander of the Saudi Armed Forces Prince Lt. Gen. Fahad Bin Turki. In the meeting, the establishment of a joint operation room in Aden and the improvement of security in the name of the

¹ Al-Watan al-Yawm, "Hani Bin Braik yu'alini nata'ij al-tahqiqat al-awalia lil-l-hujum ala mu'askar al-jala'a," 3 August 2019. <https://alwatanalyoum.net/posts/5741> (accessed 20 August 2019).

internationally recognized government in the interim capital were discussed.² The STC saw this escalation as an opportunity to push for recognition and overthrow the government in Aden, particularly at a time when local and international observers began to doubt the STC's strength given the UAE scaling back its presence. On August 6, STC President al-Zubaidi met with UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths in Abu Dhabi. Al-Zubaidi affirmed that the SF would continue the fight against terror, called on the UN Envoy to contribute to alleviating the suffering of the southern people, and stressed that peace wouldn't be achieved without the inclusion of southerners in the peace process as a principal and independent party.³



The escalating rhetoric between the Hadi government and the STC led to violence between August 7 and 10. In less than 48 hours, government buildings, state corporations and military camps of the internationally recognized government in Aden had fallen into the hands of the STC. Few had to be taken over violently as military leaders handed over their camps to state officials loyal to the STC, such as Lahj Security Chief Major General Saleh al-Sayed. These leaders played a role in the SRF, but as centrists, did not choose sides until it became clear that the Hadi government would not be able to defend

its positions. Before the takeover, they were already in contact with the STC and the UAE.

On August 15, the STC issued a statement which described the south as being occupied since the end of the south-north civil war in 1994, affirming that independence for the south was an irreversible choice and that the remaining southern areas would also be liberated.⁴ The tide turned against the STC when it attempted to expand into Abyan and Shabwa. After a few successes, Saudi-trained military reinforcements from Marib helped repel the STC push in Shabwa. In these areas, the STC had difficulty attracting political, military and tribal support, partially because these southern governorates felt marginalized within the STC's political project and because of regional divides within the south. UAE airstrikes against the Hadi government's military positions finally thwarted its return to Aden. If the UAE

² Saba news, "na'ib a-ra'is al-wuzara' wazir al-dakhaliya yabhath ma al-janib al-sa'udi 'insha ghurfat 'amaliyat mushtaraka," 19 July 2019. <https://www.sabanew.net/viewstory/51964> (accessed 20 August 2019).

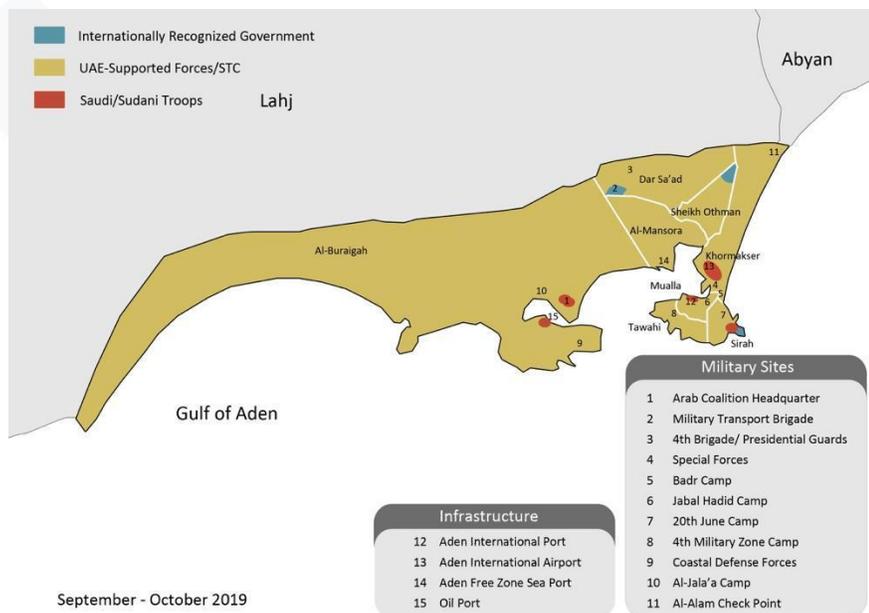
³ Yemen Akhbar, "al-ra'is al-Zubaidy yaltaqi al-mab'uth al-umami al-khas illa al-yaman Martin Grffiths," 6 August 2019. <https://www.yemenakhbar.com/2065973> (accessed 20 August 2019).

⁴ STC Website, "al-majlis al-intiqali al-janubi yusadir bayan siyasi hama," 15 August 2019. <https://stcaden.com/news/10116> (accessed 25 August 2019).

had not intervened militarily, the STC would have lost parts of Aden to the internationally recognized government. This demonstrated the STC's high reliance on military support from the UAE. The UAE airstrikes, which killed up to 300 civilians and soldiers, jeopardized the Arab coalition's legitimacy in Yemen.

The Jeddah Agreement: An Opportunity with Pitfalls

According to press reports, the Hadi government and the STC are on the verge of an agreement in Jeddah. As some "leaks" to Yemeni and Arabic press revealed, the agreement could result in a government composed 50 percent of southerners, while forces associated with the STC are to be subsumed under the internationally recognized government's control. Both parties apparently agreed to postpone discussions on southern independence until the conflict with Ansarallah is resolved. Saudi Arabia is set to monitor the implementation of the agreement and has already taken control of vital infrastructure, including the airport and port of Aden.



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The leaked contents of the deal, as well as evidence from the ground, suggest that the UAE indeed is withdrawing its political and military support from the STC, as well as its forces, as their troops are being replaced with Saudi troops in southern Yemen. The UAE allegedly will cease salary payments for troops associated with the STC; even the UAE Red Crescent organization is halting its work in the city. As a result, the STC's negotiating position has weakened and the council will gain less than it may have hoped when it entered

the talks. A government composed 50 percent of southerners carries the potential of doing more justice to the complex power constellation on the ground. More importantly, an inclusive government would allow the inclusion of the southern movement in the UN-led peace talks in the framework of the government delegation. The pitfall here is if the mistakes of the National Dialogue Conference are repeated with regard to the selection process: to give preference to southern centrists, which are more favorable to President Hadi, while the interests of more radical separatists are not represented. Such a government would not be viewed as legitimate by STC supporters. However, their inclusion in the

government along with more formalized access to state institutions, such as the management of vital infrastructure in the south or ministry leadership, could serve the STC as stepping stones to an independent state.

Such an agreement will not resolve the differences between the two parties. It rather postpones a resolution and exchanges political inclusion for a return to the military status quo, this time under Saudi, not Emirati watch. Regardless of the agreement's contents, it will not put an end to the STC'S independence ambitions in the long term. The Hadi government will continue to prevent a southern state. While both seem to have agreed to keeping these differences aside until the conflict with Ansarallah is resolved, it is not clear what this resolution would need to look like for the southern issue to finally be addressed and dealt with. Certainly, Ansarallah poses a different threat to the STC and the southern movement than the threat it poses to the Hadi government.

Regardless of the agreement, the STC will retain its influence over large parts of the security apparatus in Aden. Nominally, the SF already answer to the MoI and MoD. The integration of the forces is therefore a political, not a structural challenge. Leaders of the SF are loyal to the southern movement, and successful coordination and cooperation among the forces hinges on their complete but unlikely willingness to follow government commands loyally. To improve coordination between the different political factions, the establishment of a joint operation room including all forces and local authorities is necessary. It is probable that SF leaders will lay low and return – for the time being – to the status quo. The success of any military move on behalf of the SF against President Hadi depends on UAE support and on how successfully Saudi Arabia as monitor of the agreement's implementation can thwart the STC's ambitions. The glue that binds this agreement is that neither the internationally recognized government, nor the STC, can afford to lose the backing of the Arab coalition.

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