

Challenges to the Presidential Council

Complications of Peace and War in Yemen



Case Assessment

Political Analysis Unit

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Foreword

In the early hours of 07 April, 2022, Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi sacked vice-president, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who had been in office since 2016. He then issued a presidential declaration that ‘irreversibly’ transferred his ‘full’ powers to an eight-member presidential leadership council.¹ These moves came towards the end of the inter-Yemeni consultations that started on 29 March 2022 in Riyadh under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council and brought together the various anti-Houthi factions.

This development was preceded by the United Nations announcement of a truce between the Yemeni government and its allies on the one hand and the Houthis on the other, for two months (ending in June),² the first since 2016. These two developments received wide local and international approval, including the applause of the countries of the region.

The Declaration ended Hadi’s presidency, which began in February 2012 and was supposed to last for two years of political transition after the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down from power under the Gulf Initiative and its executive mechanism following the popular youth uprising.

This paper argues that the challenges facing the new Presidential Council are not different from those faced by the legitimate government and its regional allies Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and led to the Riyadh Agreement,³ which mostly remained a dead letter, particularly with regards to the military and security provisions. Any success of the Presidential Council in uniting the discordant parties, overcoming these challenges and gaining the confidence of Yemeni people, will directly pressure the Houthis to accept a just peace agreement or to resort to the military option.

I. Why is the Presidential Leadership Council created?

The internationally recognized government suffered a military and political collapse in the last years of the war, particularly during the period 2019-2021. The Houthis managed to make progress in Al-Bayda, Shabwa and Marib governorates during the past two years due to the state of disintegration in the anti-Houthi camp.

During the war years, the camp of the government supported by the Saudi-led coalition suffered greatly beyond hope of reforming. Most top officials, including the president and vice-president of the republic remained outside Yemen. Paramilitary formations took control of several areas after their liberation from the Houthis, and some areas of southern, western and central Yemen slipped from President Hadi's authority. This was further exacerbated by the depreciation of the national currency, the collapse of the national economy, and the absence of services in most governorates, including the city of Aden, the temporary capital of the country.

Militarily, the situation changed at the beginning of 2022 when the Giants Brigades forces backed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia participated in the battles in Shabwa and Marib governorates. Within weeks, the Houthis lost vast and strategic parts of most of the areas they controlled during the past year, and the city of Marib was secured. This was a clear message that a unified government camp will be at the expense of the Houthis and may represent a major pressure to push them to negotiations and thwart their plans of advancing towards the strategic town of Marib.

Notwithstanding the pivotal role played by President Hadi in confronting the Houthis, and obstructing external intervention projects-- in the view held by his supporters, during his last year in office, his health deteriorated so rapidly that he became unable practice the duties of his office. His sons became close to decision-making circles, and had full power over some appointments,⁴ which is a sensitive issue for Yemenis and government officials who previously denounced some of the privileges of the family of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh in the pre-2011 era.

Despite the strong Saudi-Emirati relations, events in Yemen caused tension over the past years, resulting in the emergence of differences between the two Gulf states over the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement and the type of government that could rearrange all files.

The Saudis have always complained about President Hadi's lack of coordination with them regarding some sensitive decisions, especially those that provoked their ally, the UAE. Abu Dhabi has feared the erosion of its influence near Bab al-Mandab Strait, where the former president adopted a confrontational approach towards Emirati influence. This is due in part to President Hadi's sensitivity to the local actors on whom Abu Dhabi depends for its influence. Such sensitivity is deeply entrenched in the conflicting stances in the 1986 civil war in former South Yemen. The sensitivity did not entirely arise from antipathy towards the Saudi or Emirati presence, or even from the growing Omani influence in the eastern governorates, as maintained by some. Rather, it arises from assigning his regional opponents a field role by the Saudi-led coalition at the expense of his authority, especially in the temporary capital of Aden, which he tried to secure as the seat of his rule.

II. Challenges to the Presidential Council

A quick glance at the list of members of the Presidential Leadership Council reveals that those members are carefully handpicked to satisfy the various parties, both at home and abroad. At the same time, the carefully crafted list can have a reverse effect if the Council and its supporters ignore the factors that facilitate its tasks. This plethora of discordant views may turn into tensions and disagreements at best, and may even lead to bloody fights. Yemen (both in north and south) has a negative history with presidential councils, as most of those councils ended in conflicts and wars. Presidential councils in Yemen were either dominated by one man who possessed military power and exercised the tasks of all members, or aimed to prepare the ground for a coup that usually began with the assassination or removal of the president of the council.

Table 1 shows the members of the Council, and their positions.

Rashad Al-Alimi (Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council)

Adviser to the former president and Minister of the Interior in the early 2000s. He belongs to Taiz governorate (southwest of the country). He is considered one of the most important leaders of the General People's Congress, and a popular figure approved by all parties. He has no military power at his command, and he is also a prominent academic and sociologist. He was in charge of the counter-terrorism file in Yemen during the aftermath of the 9/11 events.



Sultan Al-Arada (member)

The governor of Marib, and a prominent tribal figure in the neighboring al-Bayda and al-Jawf governorates.⁵ He is a general in the Yemeni army and a leader of the popular anti-Houthi resistance. He is affiliated with the General People's Congress and backed by the Islah party. He has a network of tribal relationships and enjoys the respect and appreciation of most of the population, especially in the eastern governorates.



Aidarous Al-Zubaidi (member)

The Chairman of the Southern Transitional Council (established in 2017), which demands the secession of former southern Yemen from the north and a return to the pre-1990 borders. It is a political front of a military force consisting of more than 90,000 troops trained, armed and financed by Abu Dhabi. In 2019, it took control of the city of Aden and other neighboring governorates.⁶ Al-Zubaidi is considered one of the most pragmatic military leaders, as he shifted his alliances among various key players-- Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE-- in order to achieve "the restoration of the state of the south," as he puts it.



Tariq Saleh (member)

He is the nephew of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the commander of the Special Forces. He was allied with the Houthis until his uncle was killed in December 2017, when he turned against and fought them with the support of the Saudi-led coalition. He is the commander of a force of some 25,000 troops (the Joint Forces), trained, financed and armed by the UAE. The ranks of his troops include the National Resistance Force, which announced setting up a political office in 2021. The political office is also led by Tariq Saleh. Other components of the Joint Forces include the Tihama Resistance Brigades, and some Giants brigades. He is a member of the General People's Congress, which was led by his uncle, Ali Abdullah Saleh.



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Faraj Al-Bahsani (member)

He is the governor of the oil-rich Hadhramout, an army general and commander of the Second Military Region, based in Mukalla. He was one of the southern military leaders who left the country after the 1994 war, which ended with the defeat of the secessionist party. He was self-exiled to Riyadh where he stayed until he was asked by the state to return to Yemen in the wake of the Houthi coup.

**Abdurrahman Al Mahrami (Abu Zaraa) (member)**

He is a Salafist, and the leader of the Giants Brigades, comprising some well-armed 25,000 troops, supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. His troops played a prominent role in striking a military balance.⁷

**Abdullah Al-Alimi (member)**

He served as the director of the presidential office during the term of former President Hadi. He is a member of the Islah Party and participated in the popular youth uprising that toppled the Saleh regime in 2011. He has no military or paramilitary power under his direct command. He is from the oil-rich Shabwa governorate, which is also a tribal powerhouse.

**Othman Mjalli (member)**

He is a member of the Yemeni House of Representatives (parliament) and a prominent tribal sheikh in Saada and neighboring governorates. A member of the General People's Congress, he is one of the tribal sheikhs opposed to the armed Houthi group, and has close ties with Saudi Arabia. Apart from a few loyal army battalions comprising troops from the tribes of Saada, he does not have a military force under his personal command.



The "Presidential Declaration" outlines the duties of the Presidential Council, including administration of political, military, and security affairs in Yemen. It also states that the council is "responsible for negotiating a permanent ceasefire with Ansar Allah [the Houthis]... and to sit at the negotiating table to reach a final and comprehensive political solution that includes a transitional period to facilitate the transition from war to peace." The presidential Declaration appointed a 50-person Consultation and Reconciliation Committee, a legal team, and an economic team to support the Presidential Council.⁸ It was supposed to name the members of a security and military committee. In this way, the presidential Declaration underscores the challenges facing the Presidential Council, which are - for the most part – a byproduct of the war that has been raging on since the Houthi takeover of the Yemeni capital, Sana'a in 2014, which, in turn, led to the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in 2015.

The Presidential Leadership Council derives its legitimacy from the decision of former President, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Unlike Hadi, who was a consensual candidate in 2012 and remained so until the Riyadh consultations (2022),⁹ the Presidential Council is not elected by Yemenis. Rather, it is believed that the Presidential Leadership Council was an abrupt coincidence of those consultations to the extent that council members knew about it only when they heard their names in the news.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the creation of the Presidential Council revived hope among Yemenis, including the population of Houthi-controlled areas, and was viewed as a push of the long stalemate that has dominated the Yemeni political and military scene since the outbreak of the war in 2015. For this reason, the Presidential Council¹¹ is faced with the task of "reviving the confidence of the Yemeni people" in state authority, after being betrayed for years by ineffectual state apparatus.

Members of the Presidential Council represent the mosaic of Yemeni geography and politics, which boosts the popularity of the council among the various parties and in the wider society. At a first glance, it seems that the members of the council were selected from the six regions, according to the outcomes of the 2013-2014 National Dialogue Conference. However, a closer look reveals that there is no representative of the Tihama region, which comprises Hodeidah, Al-Mahweet, Raymah and Hajjah governorates. These four governorates account for approximately 25% of the population of Yemen. This is the second incidence of ignoring the Tihama region, the first being the non-representation of Tihama in the Yemeni government formed on the basis of the Riyadh Agreement.



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The Ten Challenges defying the Presidential Leadership Council

- 1 The Presidency Council remains united.
- 2 It must Stay in Aden and unite the forces.
- 3 It Activates revenues and strengthening the national currency
- 4 Run anti-corruption mechanisms
- 5 Military measures, structuring and pressure on the Houthis
- 6 Combatting terrorism
- 7 Imposing the influence of the state's control
- 8 Balance of representation in the country regions
- 9 Mobilize more international support and recruiting
- 10 The armistice, lifting the siege of Taiz, and negotiating with the Houthis

Functionaries of the Presidential Leadership Council

- 1 Department of Political, Military and Security Affairs in Yemen;
- 2 Unification of the military and security forces.
- 3 Improving the economy and providing services.
- 4 Building consensus among the Yemeni eccentric components through the "Consultation and Reconciliation Conglomerate".
- 5 Negotiating with the Houthis.
- 6 A balanced foreign policy, preserving the independence and sovereignty of the state.

Auxiliary Committees of the Presidential Council

- Military and Security Committee
- The Consultation and Reconciliation Committee, consisting of 50 members, including five in the Presidency, headed by Muhammad al-Ghaithi.
- A legal team, headed by Ismail Al-Wazir and nine members
- An economic team, headed by Husam Al-Sharjabi and 14 members

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Surprisingly, these two incidents represent the first time in thirty years that a government has not included a member representing the Tihama region in general and Hodeidah governorate in particular. Neglecting this vital and important is the more surprising as the political geography of the country was taken into account in the process of the formation of the Presidential Council and the government before it. The tough circumstances created by the war make the task of the Presidential Council the more difficult and pose huge challenges to its success in achieving the principal task of moving to a new stage. The most important challenges are discussed below.

1. The Council ability to weather differences and remain united

The Presidential Council is made up of eight members, with varying, even conflicting, goals, political intentions, loyalties, divergent ideologies, and past rivalries. The members are required to work as a team in the midst of such a mixture of contradictions and make critical decisions on the most contentious issues. This is further complicated by the fact that some members are commanders of armed forces capable of pushing political differences into confrontations.

The current government led by Moeen Abdul Malik, which came into existence under the Riyadh Agreement, is characterized by the same disparity. A year after its formation, it failed to make moves forward in the security, military and service sector files. Political conflict and the disparate and rival goals within its ranks were usually the reasons for its failure. It is noteworthy that bureaucratic competition in the Government of National Accord¹² led by Mohammed Salem Basindawa (2012-2014) is considered a major reason of the failure of that government and a secondary reason for the Houthi advance towards and ultimate takeover of the capital, Sana'a in September 2014.

The presidential Declaration attempts to address the potential for discord among Council members through the following three precautionary procedures: the decision-making mechanism, the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission, and the legal advisory team.

a. The consensual decision-making mechanism:

The presidential Declaration provides a decision-making mechanism for the Presidential Council. Each member of the Council is considered a Vice-President,¹³ which means that each member has one vote. Decision are adopted by a simple majority vote. In the event of equal votes, the side for which the Chairman of the Presidential Council votes shall prevail.¹⁴

Simple majority in Yemeni legal practice means half plus one, a formula followed by the House of Representatives. In the event that a simple majority is not present, the matter is referred to a joint meeting with the Presidency of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission.¹⁵ Apparently, this happens when the Chairman or a number of members abstain from voting. Decisions are taken in the joint meeting of the Presidential Council and the Presidency of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission by a simple majority of those present. When the votes are equal, the side for which the Chairman of the Presidential Council votes shall prevail.¹⁶ If a simple majority is not present, the “Chairman of the Presidential Council has the final decision.”

b. The Consultation and Reconciliation Commission:

It is a body made up of 50 members representing the various components, tasked with the goal of “unifying the visions and goals of the various national forces and components, in a way that contributes to the restoration of state institutions” to support the Presidential Council.¹⁷ The presidential Declaration names the fifty members of the commission.¹⁸ The five-member presidential board of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission participate in the decision-making of the Presidential Council, as stated above.

Ideally, the presidency board of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission shall be elected in the first session, chaired by the Presidential Council,¹⁹ but the statement of the first meeting referred simply to agreement on choosing the presidency board, with Mohammed Al-Ghaithi as President. Born in 1989, Al-Ghaithi serves as the head of the Foreign Relations Department at the STC. Members of the presidential board are Abdul-Malik Al-Mikhlaifi (A former foreign minister), Sakhr Al-Wajeih (a former finance minister, and a parliamentarian), Jamila Ali Raja (a former advisor in several ministries, including the foreign ministry and a facilitator in the 2013-2014 National Dialogue Conference), and Akram Al-Amiri (Assistant Director of the Hadhramout All-Inclusive Conference).²⁰ The reference to consensus means that members were nominated, probably by the Presidential Council, rather than elected. Sakhr Al-Wajeih was absent from the first meeting of the Presidency, which took place two days later,²¹ but he attended the last meeting with the Chairman of the Presidential Council.²²

In setting up consultation bodies and bringing disparate components closer together, Yemenis tend to appoint older personalities with previous experiences, particularly in the position of ‘chairman’. The “presidential declaration” refers to this fact. It states that the oldest member among the members of the Presidential Council shall take over as chairman in the event of the death or resignation of the Chairman of the Council.²³ However, things follow a different trajectory this time as the youngest of the five nominated members of the presidential board of the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission has been appointed Chairman. Legal concerns have been voiced regarding the nomination by appointment rather than elections or consensus constitutes a violation of the Presidential Declaration, which gave the Presidential Council with legitimacy.

The Presidential Declaration also grants the Chairman of the Presidential Council the right to appoint whomever he sees fit in the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission, as long as he does not exceed the maximum number of fifty members..²⁴ This gives him the power to influence the decision indirectly, even though the Declaration grants him the right to make decisions.

c. The governing rules:

These are the rules regulating the work of the Presidential Council, the Consultation and Reconciliation Commission, and the legal and economic teams. These rules are drafted by a legal team consisting of a chairman and nine members, headed by the legal expert, Ismail Ahmed al-Wazir,²⁵ who apparently drafted the presidential Declaration.²⁶ This team will also provide legislative and constitutional consultations at the request of the Chairman of the Presidential Council, after submitting the draft rules to the Chairman of the Council within 45 days of the presidential Declaration (ended on May 22, 2022). The Chairman of the Presidential Council is supposed to approve the draft rules within 15 days²⁷ (ending on June 06 2022).

2. Staying in Aden and uniting the troops

As noted earlier, restoring the confidence of the Yemeni people in the state requires the Presidential Council to stay in the temporary capital, Aden, and to avoid returning abroad, and the return of other institutions, such as the parliament, to the country, given that it was elected by the Yemenis.

The Presidential Council, the government and the parliament returned to Aden, where and the Chairman and members of the council were sworn-in before the parliament, which held its first session for the first time since 2015 in the city of Aden. The Southern Transitional Council had categorically refused to allow the parliament to convene in Aden, a stance that forced the parliament to hold a previous session in April 2019 in Seiyun, Hadramout.

For the Chairman and members of the Presidential Council, the parliament and other state institutions, to stay or be based permanently in Aden is not an option among many available alternatives, but rather a mandatory obligation to confirm normalization of the situation and ending the division through the representation of all parties in the Presidential Council. This was understood by the STC chairman, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, who became a member of the Presidential Council and agreed that the parliament shall convene in Aden and nowhere else to "confirm the unity of the Presidential Council."²⁹ However, without a strict grip over security and military affairs in Aden, the Presidential Council and the government will be subject to either expulsion, as happened in 2019, or targeting by the Houthis or other terrorist groups. This may be a major reason for the collapse of the Presidential Council and can lead to a split among its members and relocating its headquarters to another governorate, or even to flying the country and returning abroad.

It has been propagated by STC members and leaders that "the Chairman of the Presidential Council is under the protection of the STC in Aden." Thus, it appears as if the Presidential Council has legitimized the STC and other dissident factions outside the state apparatus, such as the forces commanded by Tariq Saleh and the Giants only. However, the actual goal behind the formation of the Presidential Council is to unify the security and military file, which was referred to in the Riyadh Agreement, which is considered a preparatory stage for creating the Presidential Council as a solution to complete the implementation of that agreement.

The Houthi incursion on Shabwa in late 2021, the threat they posed to Marib, and their targeting of Aden and vital installations in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in January and February 2022, all confirm the need for the Presidential Council and other state institutions to remain in Aden.

This will only be achieved by imposing full state authority over all security apparatus in Aden, and the restructuring of the military and security units. Such measures are prerequisites of stability and development. In addition, without making Aden as a model of stability, security, economic recovery and development, the sheer presence of the Presidential Council will change nothing and the term of the former president will continue to be a lived reality, albeit with a different name. Finally, the council will fail to mobilize the desired popular support. Subsequently, hopes for restoring the Yemeni people's confidence in state institutions will diminish as incentives for stability, security and economic recovery will be lacking in all governorates.

3. Revenues and the national currency:

The Presidential Council needs to achieve a qualitative leap forward in the country's collapsed economy in its main areas of control. This issue is urgent in two main arenas: the monopoly on revenue collection and revitalization of frozen revenue sources. Such moves will provide the internationally recognized government with a substantial cash flow in the Central Bank of Yemen, and dry up the sources of wealth of armed groups that currently collect government revenues and other levies. It will also impose the authority of the Presidential Council upon the other governorates.

It may be noted that during the first three months of STC administrative autonomy (April-July 2020), its revenues exceeded \$320 million.³⁰ The STC controls the customs revenues from the port of Aden. Other ports may not deposit customs revenues in accounts at the Central Bank of Yemen. In 2021, total customs revenues exceeded 500 billion riyals (512 million dollars).³¹ A portion of these revenues can be used in the development and maintenance of the ports of Aden and Mukalla. Only \$49 million is required to restore both ports to their pre-war status and maintain their current operational capacity, of which \$21 million is needed for the maintenance of Aden port, while the sum of \$27 million will go for the maintenance of the port of Mukalla.³²

Hadramout, Marib and the other governorates must deposit revenues at the Central Bank of Yemen in Aden, rather than keep those funds in their private coffers. The positions of the governors of Marib and Hadramout as members of the Presidential Council must not be used to garner more powers in their respective governorates regarding the disbursement of revenues, and such powers must be curtailed.

Confronting the campaigns of levies and illegal funds carried out by authorities parallel to the state is crucial for achieving a tangible impact on the lives of the residents of Aden governorate in particular and the other governorates within the territorial scope and authority of the Presidential Council.

It is important for the population in Houthi areas to feel that the Presidential Council champions their rights, meets their needs, and pays their salaries. Towards this end, the Presidential Council needs to pressure and compel the Houthis to fulfill their obligations outlined in the Stockholm Agreement; i.e. to allocate the revenues of the vital Hodeidah Port to pay the salaries of public employees in their dominions. The agreement grants public employees the revenues of Hodeidah Port. Although the Houthis agreed to deposit those revenues in a special account at CBY, Hodeidah branch, they soon turned against the agreement and withdrew the funds in favor of the war effort. The last truce (April 2022) grants oil tankers access to the port of Hodeidah, but failed to stipulate that the port proceeds from these vessels should be allocated to pay public employees. It is estimated that the monthly revenues of the port of Hodeidah amount to 14 billion Yemeni riyals (\$23.3 million).³³

In addition, it is crucial to revitalize oil and gas revenues. Since 2015, the UAE has been using the Belhaf facility in Shabwa as a military site. This port used to contribute \$1 billion to the state's general budget in the pre-war era. Abu Dhabi is also accused of preventing the Yemeni government from exporting oil, as it controls most of the oil-exporting ports: Al-Nashima port in Shabwa, and Al-Shahr port in Hadramout.³⁴ In March 2022, a high-ranking American delegation unexpectedly visited the governorates of Shabwa and Hadramout, in addition to Al-Mahra governorate on the border with the Sultanate of Oman. The visit was probably triggered by the American desire to resume the country's exports of gas and oil in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine.³⁵

Hard currency revenues can greatly contribute to the recover the value of national currency, and to pay the salaries of public employees. The Saudi-Emirati grant of \$3.3 billion, which was announced after the presidential Declaration of the Presidential Council, provides the Yemeni government with the chance to bridge the exchange rate difference between the government-controlled areas and Houthi dominions. This move will alleviate famine and harsh economic conditions, but it will not cover expenses if the oil, gas and port revenues are not activated.

Evidently, the Presidential Council views state, army and security employees in the areas under its control a top priority in terms of the regular and uninterrupted payment of salaries. Yet, it believes that paying public employees in Houthi-controlled areas is linked to the armed group's delivery of the revenues of the Hodeidah Port - as explained by Chairman Rashad Al-Alimi on May 21, 2022.³⁶ This requires substantial international pressure on the Houthis to abide by their previous commitments as outlined in the Stockholm Agreement.³⁷ This does not exempt the Presidential Council from its responsibility of paying the salaries of all state employees, according to 2014 data.

4. Enforcing Anti-Corruption Mechanisms

If the Presidential Council and the government reside permanently in the temporary capital, Aden, stability will be reflected in the performance of official state institutions, and the provision of services to citizens in their areas of control. Consequently, they are required to revitalizing the role of all anti-corruption institutions, both civil and military. Corruption has ballooned during the war years. Officials and leaders on both sides have made illicit enrichment by utilizing the expansion of the war economy. Therefore, the oversight of anti-corruption bodies in the various ministries is a prerequisite for achieving political and economic stability in the areas controlled by the internationally recognized government.

At the same time, while the mechanism and rules regulating the functions of the Presidential Council are still being prepared, it is important to have oversight and procedures with accountability powers to prevent job inflation and conflicting appointments of members of the Presidential Council.

This will also help prevent members of the Council from protecting government/military officials accused of financial or administrative corruption prompted by considerations of political affiliation or social kinship.

The effective functioning of anti-corruption institutions ensures that individuals and armed groups do not emerge as new financial centers. It will also lead to combating speculation in the national currency and achieving the desired economic stability as a result.

5. Military measures: restructuring the armed forces and pressurizing the Houthis

The Presidential Leadership Council comprises most of the main commanders of the paramilitary forces that are fighting the Houthis. In his speech on the thirty-second anniversary of Yemeni reunification, President Rashad Al-Alimi said that, in a few days, he would announce the members of a committee to unify the armed forces "in accordance with the Riyadh Agreement" and "the Declaration of the transfer of power."³⁸ The Riyadh Agreement refers solely to the merger of the forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council in the ministries of interior and defense. It does not provide any details as to the way of integrating the other paramilitary forces, such as the troops commanded by Tariq Saleh and the Giants Brigades. The presidential Declaration refers to the unification of all troops. Yet, it does not provide any specific mechanism for entrusting this task to a military and security committee formed by the presidential council and authorized to restructure all troops as a whole. In case those troops, such as Tariq Saleh, the Giants Brigades, etc., evaded restructuring, the Southern Transitional Council will be provided with a justification and might follow suit or alternatively, it will search for a different mechanism for restructuring the armed forces other than the one detailed in the Riyadh Agreement.

According to the Presidential Declaration, the Presidential Council shall undertake the task of nominating the members of the joint security and military committee. The tasks of this committee as detailed in the Declaration are as follows:

- a. Achieving security and stability by adopting policies that would prevent the occurrence of any armed confrontations throughout the republic
- b. Creating the conditions and taking the necessary steps conducive to a successful integration of the armed forces under a unified national command structure within the framework of the rule of law.
- c. Ending the division in the armed forces and addressing its causes.

- d. End all armed conflicts.
- e. Developing a national doctrine for the army and security services
- f. Any tasks that the Council deems necessary to enhance stability and security.

Obviously, these measures aim at ambitious goals rather than the immediate task of precluding clashes. They aim at creating the suitable milieu conducive to ending division and hence precluding any armed conflicts and establishing a national military and security doctrine. The reference to the fact that committee members will be representative of the various parties represented in the Presidential Council, or other parties, suggests that the process of selecting its chairman and members will be slow. Ideally, the weighting factor shall be entrusted to neutral military commanders, not affiliated to any of the parties represented in the Presidential Council. Moreover, a decree shall detail the exact tasks of the committee, the decision-making process, and implementation methods.

There are concerns over achieving a 'formal unification' by integrating the paramilitary formations in the military and security apparatus, while allowing battalions and brigades to retain their unified entities within the Ministries of Defense and the Interior under the command of their former commanders rather than the General Staff of the national military or the Ministry of Interior operations. Such superficial restructuring will provide those forces with the opportunity to rebel against their respective ministry and regain their former independence. Such a scenario will create cracks in the structure of state institutions, and might ultimately lead to the collapse of the entire state especially in the context of war or a crisis, or subsequent disputes among the constituents of the Council and its subsidiary organs. Therefore, it is important to systematically integrate and merge forces into the ministries of Defense and the Interior. This is a demanding and slow process that requires sufficient funds, power, and substantial force to control and dominate any potential rebel force.

The merger of forces as a first stage under a single operations command enables the Ministry of the Interior to establish security and stability, chase terrorists, and secure the capital, Aden, and other governorates. It also provides the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff with a great deterrent force against the Houthis, to ensure cutting off the armed group's plans to recapture the southern governorates, and foils their attempts to take the eastern governorates, including Marib. Such a measure will also push the Houthis towards a peace agreement, based on national conditions.

The success of the united forces in expelling the Houthis from Shabwa and Marib in early 2022 clearly demonstrates the fact that it is possible to defeating the Houthis in any decisive battle. The Houthis withdrew from those areas for the first time in four years of advances. Yemeni military troops did not achieve a comparable success against the Houthis as did the joint forces in Marib and Shabwa. the two governorates, nor had the Yemeni military launched an attack on the Houthis since the date of signing of the Stockholm Agreement.

There are concerns that, during the next stage, the Houthis and Iran will penetrate the forces under the command of the Southern Transitional Council. These concerns are more tangible in the case of conflict within the ranks of the Southern Transitional Council and other paramilitary brigades, which were built on different foundations, goals and loyalties, if they refuse to conform to the dictates of the Presidential Council decisions of restructuring the armed forces. For these reasons, two members of the Presidential Council, Aidarous al-Zubaidi Abu Zara'a al-Mahrami, held meetings with the commanders of the Security Belts and the Elite Troops in Aden. It has been crystal-clear that these troops need to be restructured and that a committee shall be created for this purpose. During the past years, the internal cohesion of the components of the Southern Transitional Council and the brigades affiliated to it have been tested by clashes that lasted for days in Aden, the last of which erupted in October 2021.³⁹ Without a full control of the security belts in Aden, securing the city and structuring the troops becomes a very difficult task.

6. Combating Terrorism

Confronting terrorist organizations and putting an end to attacks on the temporary capital, Aden, is the first litmus test of the Presidential Council. During the past years of war, the stay of government officials in Aden, including the president of the republic, was accompanied by the growing threat of terrorist organizations. The Yemeni president and prime minister were targeted in several attacks during their rare and temporary intervals of stay in Aden.

There are cells of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) dispersed in pockets in the surrounding governorates. They usually launch attacks on security points or assassinate security and army officials. Although al-Qaeda has received severe blows over the past years, it is striving hard to rebuild its ranks. Recently, information indicates that the two organizations are trying to create new strongholds in unpopulated areas in the mountains around Abyan and in the Hadhramout desert.

The failure to create a united security apparatus tempts terrorist organizations to launch attacks and disturb security. During the first month of the relocation of the Presidential Council to Aden, many operations bearing the hallmarks of terrorist groups took place. The Commander of Joint Operations in the Fourth Military Region, Brigadier General Saleh al-Yafei, survived a car bomb explosion targeting his entourage in Aden.⁴⁰ A security point also managed to seize “a terrorist with an explosive belt in Lahj while he was on his way to Aden.”⁴¹ In March 2022, the commander of the Al-Anad Axis, Major General Thabet Jawas, and a number of his entourage were killed.

Al-Qaeda gets support from the Houthi group, which has a vested interest in the instability and insecurity of the governorates controlled by the government. Information indicates that the Houthis have released dozens of Al-Qaeda members in recent months. Information also shows that, through tribal sheikhs loyal to them, the Houthis supply some of the al-Qaeda elements with arms and transfer al-Qaeda contingents from al-Bayda to government-controlled areas. Al-Qaeda has managed to secure more funding over the past year by facilitating arms smuggling from government-controlled areas to the Houthis.⁴³ The organization has extensive experience in obtaining weapons from external and smuggling them to most regions in the country. At the same time, Al-Qaeda is building its own internal intelligence apparatus, attempting to enlist the help of former intelligence officials in building a special communications network that evades surveillance and espionage, after the organization lost its previous network due to US drone strikes during Donald Trump's term.⁴⁴

The unification of the military, security and intelligence apparatuses is very crucial in combating al-Qaeda operations, securing the city of Aden from potential attacks, ensuring the security of the Presidential Council and members of the government, and creating a milieu of satisfactory political and economic stability in Aden to make it a model in this respect. Moreover, combating the new al-Qaeda camps in other governorates makes the unification of troops a priority. The current division of troops gives terrorist organizations a good opportunity to expand, penetrate tribal areas and win new recruits. Therefore, the persistent schism between the Southern Transitional Council troops and Presidential Protection Brigades in Sheikh Salem in Abyan governorate is no longer justified. An initial step towards unifying the troops involves outing an end to the current state of war in that governorate. This must be buttressed with making preparations for a large-scale confrontation of the terrorist organizations and foiling its attempts to return to the town.

At the same time, it is important that partners in the Presidential Council shall stop exchanging accusations of aiding al-Qaeda. In at least two incidents, the Southern Transitional Council accused the Islah party of coordinating with al-Qaeda, the first in an STC leadership meeting,⁴⁵ and the second in a comment on an attack that targeted security officials in Al-Dhali' governorate.⁴⁶

7. Imposing state authority

This is the most important test of the Presidential Council. Members of the Presidential Council its members cannot move freely around Aden. Celebrations of national Unification Day were banned in the Ma'ashiq Palace and the city of Aden, and national flags were lowered from the house of Tariq Saleh, member of the Presidential Council. Banning of the celebration of the nation's Unification Day is a clear message that the Southern Transitional Council will not abandon its control and rule over Aden. It seems as if the STC were above the Presidential Council! This state of affairs applied to other parts of the country. In Socotra, for example, STC gunmen attacked on online meeting of the Executive Office and the governor, Ramzi Mahrous, terminated the meeting and expelled government officials.

Moreover, Aidarous al-Zubaidi still meets the governors of southern governorates in his capacity as STC chairman.

In addition, the Presidential Council needs to put an end to the geopolitical competition over the governorates of Mahra and Socotra. The Sultanate of Oman, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are competing in expanding their presence in the two strategic governorates. The also to other governorates, including Shabwa and Taiz.

State authority is not limited to revenue collection and sovereignty, but also includes imposing its authority in the administration of all state apparatus, including civil and military communications. A leaked document shows a directive issued by the office of the Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council and the government ordering the confiscation of a shipment of communications equipment on its way to the Yemeni Ministry of Defense at the Shahan port on the border with the Sultanate of Oman. According to the document, the shipment uses the GSM technology, rather than a military communications system.⁴⁷ However, a source at the Ministry of Defense confirmed that the minister of Defense agreed to hand over the shipment to the Ministry of Communications, and justified the import of equipment valued at about six million dollars with the signing a previous agreement between the Ministries of Communications and Defense. Under the said agreement, the latter undertakes to secure a G4 network, providing the service to about 150,000 subscribers. During the first phase, the service will be provided to field military commanders leading operations at the fronts, while during the second phase, the service will be provided to leaders at the Ministry of the Interior. The source considers the issue as one of the most intricate files that leads to failure to secure a military communications network, which negatively affects the performance of the military. The Houthi penetration of the army has led to the death of many of its leaders and its defeat in several battles.

However, such successful move by the Presidential Council may not succeed in imposing the sovereignty of the state when the target is an armed group outside the state apparatus and control, or an interest lobby.

Restoring state control of the diverse aspects is important to its sovereignty, especially those related to resources and information security, such as communications, civil registry, passports, air traffic permits, the exchange market and monopoly of arms imports.

8. Balanced representation of the diverse constituents in state apparatus

The exclusion of the Tihama region from the Presidential Council and the government was badly received by the people of the region governorates. Hence, the Presidential Council needs to take this into account in the new appointments. Dozens of former state officials also complained of regional, partisan or professional marginalization that they suffered during the rule of President Hadi. The Presidential Council needs to benefit from the expertise of those who had been marginalized to restore the efficacy of state institutions.

9. Enlisting more international support

The Presidential Council has a good opportunity to mobilize international support for Yemeni politics and economy. International meetings and positions, including those of the UN Security Council, show widespread welcome and recognition of the Presidential Council. As a new authority in the country, the Presidential Council has a good opportunity for obtaining support to save the national economy and to put pressure on the Houthis to force them to negotiate peace and cease mobilizing for war. Revitalizing Yemeni embassies abroad diplomatically and in the media is very important at the current stage. This is a key challenge to the Presidential Council, especially as Yemeni embassies have witnessed stagnation for years.

In addition to international mobilization, mobilizing support for the Presidential Council at the regional level is important and shall continue in the Arab Gulf states and other countries in the region. Intensifying work with government intuitions in Egypt and the Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, is important during the next stage to secure support for the Republican Council's effort of unifying the Yemeni armed forces and to protect the Bab Mandeb Strait from the Houthi threat.

It has been reported that Riyadh had suspended the energy subsidies since May. Apparently, there are suspicions in Saudi Arabia that have been corruption cases related to the revenues of this grant, as happened with the Saudi deposit at the Central Bank of Yemen. ⁴⁸

This will increase pressure on the government that made Aden its temporary capital. The capital's electricity requirements cost the government millions of dollars. Unless international support is secured to solve the electricity issue, this issue will be a blow to the Presidential Council at an early stage of assuming its responsibilities from inside the country. This may lead to the return of the country's leadership abroad to escape popular pressure.

10. The truce, lifting the siege on Taiz, and negotiating with the Houthis

The truce began in Yemen a week before the Presidential Declaration. By the end of the first month of the truce, most of its provisions were fulfilled. The various parties more or less abided by the cease-fire, even though there were continuous violations. Oil tankers were allowed to the port of Hodeidah. More than 10 tankers arrived at the port. Commercial flights between Sana'a and the airports of Cairo and Amman, and flights to Amman were resumed. After initial opposition, Cairo agreed to flights coming from Sana'a. The meeting between the Houthis and the Yemeni government to open the roads in Taiz took place. Government and Houthi delegations also arrived in Amman in the third week of May 2022.

The truce, which unexpectedly held, can be a basis for extension of cease-fire and holding broader negotiations with the Houthis. The Presidential Declaration indicates that the mission of the Presidential Council is to negotiate with the Houthis, referring to them as 'Ansar Allah', which is the Houthi self-designation. It is the first time since the Houthis took control of Sana'a that they are referred to in such a friendly manner. However, there are some observations on the truce:

- The truce was based on the concessions of the internationally recognized government: it opened the port of Hodeidah and the airport of Sana'a. On the other hand, the Houthis continue to launch attacks, stir up tension and recruit fighters and supply weapons to most of the fighting fronts.
- The Houthis refused to open the roads leading to Taiz governorate, which means that the Houthis have not made any concessions so far. The crisis in Taiz is broader than the roads issue, even though this issue is the main cause of the blockade.

Since 2016, the Houthis have denied any access to drinking water in Taiz city by blocking water supplies coming from the neighboring Al-Haima district. Moreover, 70% of the wells are located in the Houthi-controlled areas of Al-Hawban and the neighboring districts on which the city residents rely for drinking water. Water is usually transported by water-trucks, but these are unable to go to the city due to the siege. Similarly, the Houthis obstruct the power supply of the city, which relies on a commercial power plant based in Mocha for its power needs.

- Consultations began between the government and the Houthi delegations in Amman. Discussions focused on opening the roads in Taiz. While names of the government delegation indicate their affiliation with Taiz city and hence represent the demands of the city population, only 50% of the members of the Houthi delegation are from Taiz whereas 50% of the members are from Saada. This latter delegation is headed by Yahya al-Razami, a Houthi military commander believed to have close relations with commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Yemen.

- While attempting to expand the scope of the consultations to cover all roads in the country is important, it is a stressful and time-consuming process. The Houthis use it as a tactic to escape their obligations to lift the siege on the city of Taiz and to end the suffering of its residents.

- It is expected that the truce between the Yemeni government and the Houthi armed group will be extended. Although the Houthis have not implemented any of their obligations regarding the opening of the roads in Taiz, the internationally recognized government will agree to the extension, especially if negotiations to open the roads in Taiz continue in the Amman consultations. The Houthis have already benefited from a non-binding truce by imposing their conditions regarding the Hodeidah port or Sana'a International Airport. They are also preparing for a new offensive. Most reports refer to recruitment campaigns to reinforce battlefronts in Marib governorate, and digging trenches and barricades in the front lines. Since the date of announcing the truce until May 20, statements by the Yemeni military indicate that the Houthis have committed 4276 violations at battlefronts.⁴⁹ The Houthis also accused the Yemeni army of committing violations.

Conclusion

Obviously, establishing the Presidential Council is a first step to push Yemen to either of two options to end the long stalemate: the Houthis shall participate in the Presidential Council, or military escalation is the final resort. The Presidential Council believes that with the unification of forces, the Houthis will be weaker than before, while the Houthis are counting on the disparate composition of the membership of the Presidential Council, which could lead to its failure.

Apparently, the idea of getting President Hadi and Vice-President, Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar out of the way and setting up a presidential council is partly the outcome of negotiations between the Houthis and the Saudis, with Western blessings, in the Sultanate of Oman, which serves as facilitator and mediator. The Houthis had previously proposed the formation of a presidential council in the Kuwait consultations (2016) to replace President Hadi. This proposal was a main cause of the failure of those consultations as the internationally recognized government refused. The Yemeni government and Saudi Arabia seem to be pushing for peace. The final statement of the Riyadh consultations clarifies the delegates' agreement on "the failure of military solutions.. and engaging in a political solution, sitting at the negotiating table to discuss all points of contention, and abandoning military solutions, starting with consolidating the current armistice and entering into peace talks under the auspices of the United Nations." ⁵⁰

The success of the Presidential Council entails moving towards a new transitional period in Yemen, which may include the Houthis. However, the success of the Presidential Council in overcoming the challenges it faces hinges upon its members' willingness to give priority to national interests, which must prevail over their own goals and interests. It is the last possible solution to end the war.

On the other hand, the Houthis have an infamous history of subjecting truces and dialogues to assess their interests, and to benefit from them militarily and financially, before in addition to the political gains. They are closely linked to status of Iran vis-à-vis the international community. Currently, Iran is undergoing a monotonous dialogue regarding the nuclear agreement, while internally it witnesses increasing popular discontent because of the deterioration of the economic conditions, which was exacerbated by international sanctions, and Tehran's preoccupation with supporting armed rebellions outside its borders.

Israeli attacks on its troops in Syria have increased, and several military leaders have been assassinated. These pressures may push Iran to direct its allies in the region to launch attacks to destabilize the region as a means of relieve pressures on their patron. In Yemen, as much as they are trying to make political gains from the announced truce, the Houthis are preparing militarily on multiple fronts, especially borders with Saudi Arabia, Marib and Taiz. Their missile threats and drone attacks may be directed again at Aden and Shabw, as well as Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, to target both the political decision of, and economic support for, the Yemeni government. Hence, as much as the Presidential Council is keen to achieve its goals, in particular to achieve peace and end the war, it must prepare for imposing peace by military force. At least, it has to prepare for defending its entity that will disintegrate if the Houthis achieve any of their military goals such as controlling Marib, Taiz or Mocha, or even return to Shabwa, Lahj,, Al-Dhali', or any area where there is a military force fighting it.

The failure or collapse and disintegration of the Presidential Council for any military reasons such as those that the Houthis are preparing for, or economic ones as a result of the food or energy crisis, will have disastrous consequences for the future of peace in Yemen. The alternative will be multiple militias and small-pocket wars that will portend a bleak future for Yemen and extinguish the spark of hope that Yemenis are trying to keep ignited.

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- 3 The "Riyadh Agreement" is a Saudi-brokered reconciliation agreement between the Yemeni government and the Southern Transitional Council. The agreement was signed in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, on 05 November 2019, following clashes in August 2019 between the troops of the Southern Transitional Council and government forces in Aden governorate, during which the UAE bombed the Yemeni army forces positioned at the entrances to Aden, killing and wounding dozens of soldiers. As a result, the STC took control of Aden and other areas, and expelled government forces, as well as the president and members of the Yemeni government. A few months later, in April 2020, the STC announced autonomy of the governorates and areas under its control. The agreement was a recognition of the legitimacy of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council, and was the first recognition by the Yemeni government of the de-facto authority.
- 4 Three informed Yemeni officials spoke to a researcher at Abaad Center on 10 April via WhatsApp. The officials were informed of the appointment of governors.
- 5 In October 2016, Sultan al-Arada was temporarily chosen as president of the Saba region, which includes Marib, al-Jawf and al-Bayda, with the approval of the governors of the two governorates, until the adoption of the constitution. This indicates his popularity in the three provinces. Marib is an oil province, where the Safer gas facility and a power station that supplies many provinces are located. Al-Jawf is characterized by fertile soil, in spite of its desert climate and terrain, and borders on Saudi Arabia. Reports indicate the presence of oil and gas stocks in this governorate. As for Al-Bayda, it is a tribal governorate with difficult terrain, and has borders with eight governorates, four in the former northern Yemen and four in the former southern Yemen.
- 6 After fighting with the Yemeni government forces that were expelled from Aden. The STC is only one of several other southern components of the Southern Movement, which is divided between the demand for secession and the federal state. The STC does not represent all the southern provinces.

7 His troops were instrumental in driving the Houthis out of Shabwa in early 2022. These troops were deployed as a neutral force to front lines in Abyan governorate separating the Yemeni government forces and the STC militias to prevent renewed clashes after the Riyadh Agreement.

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9 Inter-Yemeni consultations, boycotted by the Houthis, and attended by more than a thousand Yemenis, were held in Riyadh between 29 March 2022 and 07 April 2022 under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

10 No presidential council was discussed in those consultations. Most of the ideas put forward revolved around appointing a new Yemeni vice-president, replacing Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, or appointing more advisers to President Hadi.

11 The short form ‘Presidential Council’ will be used henceforth.

12 The government was divided equally between the General People's Congress, led by Ali Abdullah Saleh, and the opposition.

13 Article 1, Paragraph D of the Presidential Declaration

14 Article 1, Paragraph K/1 of the Presidential Declaration

15 Article 1, Paragraph K/2 of the Presidential Declaration

16 Article 1, Paragraph K/3 of the Presidential Declaration

17 Article 2 of the Presidential Declaration

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24 Article 2, Paragraph E of the Presidential Declaration: “The Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council may appoint whomever he deems appropriate to be a member of the Commission if required, provided that the number of members does not exceed one hundred.”

25 Article 3 of the Presidential Declaration

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