

# Nation's Shield Forces: New Player in Dynamic Theatre

Case Analysis  
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**Abstract-:**

The present study discusses the many military formations within the legitimate Yemeni government ,with a focus on Nation's Shield Forces) NSF (which formed last year by a decree from Dr .Rashad Al-Alimi ,the President of the Presidential Leadership Council.

The study explores the circumstances surrounding the formation of the NSF and the areas of its deployment .According to the presidential decree ,these forces fall under the direct command of Al-Alimi ,the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces .This grants NSF priority over other military and semi-military formations that do not fall under the Ministry of Defense.

The study also attempts to identify certain indicators of the growing influence of NSF, particularly in relation to its Saudi support and funding .This comes at a time when concerns are escalating among the forces and military formations that control Southern Yemen .The expansion of NSF has been perceived a potential threat to aforementioned formations and their external backers.

**New Forces and an Old Conflict-:**

The Presidential decree confirmed that the NSF would serve as reserve forces under the command of Al-Alimi, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and security. The president would “determine the number of these forces, their duties, and operational theater through an operational command issued by him.”[1] .According to the decree, Brigadier Bashir Saif al-Subaihi was appointed the commander of the NSF .[2] Al-Subaihi is one of the Salafist leaders who participated in the fight against the Houthis in various areas and fronts ,including Aden and Lahj.

Before the presidential decree to form the NSF ,these forces referred to themselves as )New Giants Brigades ,(then changed the name to) Nation's Shield Forces .(They define themselves as” independent forces under a reliable Salafist leadership “,In statements previously circulated in media ,the NSF mentioned that they” were formed in coordination with various political and military forces under the leadership of the Arab coalition«.



Hence ,the formation of these forces has raised a number of questions ,primarily stemming from the circumstances surrounding their creation .This comes in the midst of a state of divisions and disputes within the legitimate government institutions ,most notably within the Presidential Leadership Council itself which includes leaders of a **number of military formations .These include:**

**1 -Dr .Rashad al-Alimi ,the President of the Presidential Leadership Council) PLC:(**

He is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and Security) National Army,( along with all the pro-government brigades operating under the military and security institutions, as well as the NSF as reserve forces.

**2- Faraj al-Bahsani, a member of the PLC:** He is the founder and commander of the Hadrami Elite Forces, which are semi-military units that control the Hadramout coast since 2016.

**3- Tariq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, a member of the PLC:** He is the founder and commander of the National Resistance Forces, which control the western coastal districts since 2018.

**4 -Aidarus al-Zoubaidi ,a member of the PLC :**He is the chairman of the Southern Transitional Council) STC ,(a political council established with the support of UAE in mid .2017-He is also the commander of various security and military formations ,including the Support and Reinforcement Brigades and the Security Belt Forces .These forces control Aden ,Lahj ,Abyan ,and Al-Dhale'e.

**5 -Abdulrahman al-Mahrami) Abu Zara'a ,(a member of the PLC :**He is the founder and commander of the Giants Brigades ,Forces funded by UAE .These forces have a presence in the western coastal areas ,as well as Aden ,Lahj ,and some areas in Abyan, Shabwa ,and Al-Dhale'e.

**6 -Abdullah Al-Alimi ,a member of the PLC :**He plays a role in supervising some military units that were previously loyal to the former President ,Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. These units include the Presidential Guard Brigades and other army brigades in Shabwa and Abyan) Part of the National Army.(

**7 -Othman Mujalli ,a member of the PLC :**He has close ties with the army brigades stationed on the Saudi-Yemeni border) Part of the National Army.(

**8 -Sultan al-Arada ,a member of PLC :**He supervises most of army and security brigades in Marib during the war) Part National Army .(He is the direct responsible for providing the needs of these forces in the oil-rich governorate ,which is constantly targeted by the Houthi group.



## THE PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP COUNCIL CONSISTS OF COMMANDERS OF DIFFERENT MILITARY FORMATIONS



### Dr. Rashad al-Alimi, the President of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC):

He is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and Security (National Army), along with all the pro-government brigades operating under the military and security institutions, as well as the NSF as reserve forces.



### Faraj al-Bahsani, a member of the PLC:

He is the founder and commander of the Hadrami Elite Forces, which are semi-military units that control the Hadramout coast since 2016.



### Tariq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, a member of the PLC:

He is the founder and commander of the National Resistance Forces, which control the western coastal districts since 2018.



### Abdulrahman al-Mahrami (Abu Zara'a), a member of the PLC:

He is the founder and commander of the Giants Brigades, Forces funded by UAE. These forces have a presence in the western coastal areas, as well as Aden, Lahj, and some areas in Abyan, Shabwa, and Al-Dhale'e.



### Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, a member of the PLC:

He is the chairman of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a political council established with the support of UAE in mid-2017. He is also the commander of various security and military formations, including the Support and Reinforcement Brigades and the Security Belt Forces. These forces control Aden, Lahj, Abyan, and Al-Dhale'e.



### Abdullah Al-Alimi, a member of the PLC:

He plays a role in supervising some military units that were previously loyal to the former President, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. These units include the Presidential Guard Brigades and other army brigades in Shabwa and Abyan (Part of the National Army).



### Othman Mujalli, a member of the PLC:

He has close ties with the army brigades stationed on the Saudi-Yemeni border (Part of the National Army).



### Sultan al-Arada, a member of the PLC:

Sultan al-Arada, a member of PLC: He supervises most of army and security brigades in Marib during the war (Part National Army). He is the direct responsible for providing the needs of these forces in the oil-rich governorate, which is constantly targeted by the Houthi group.

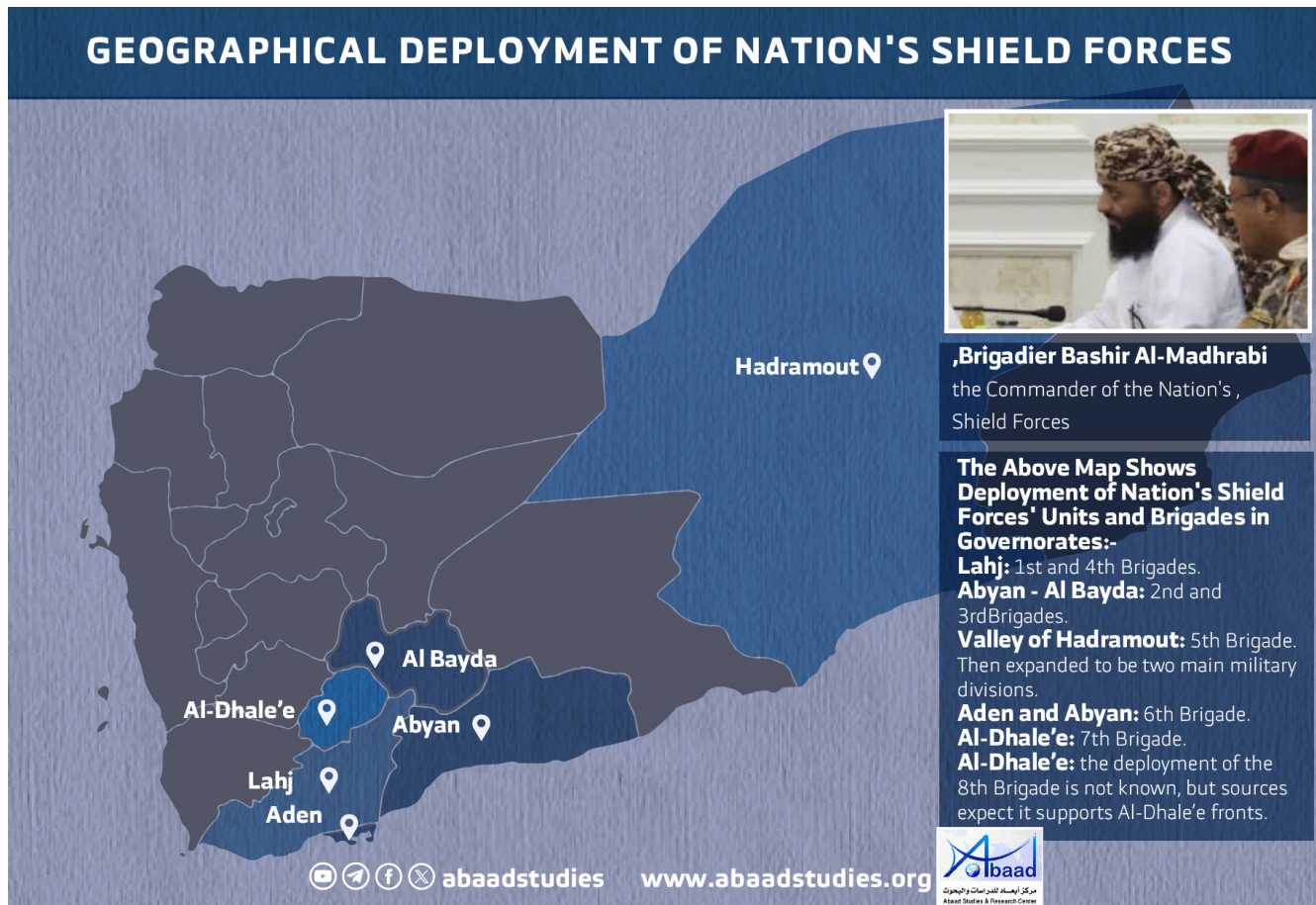
Therefore ,the formation of a new force under the President of the PLC ,nearly nine months after the transfer of presidential powers from President Hadi to the PLC ,reveals several significant facts and implications .It indicates that the division within the armed forces of the legitimate government institution has become ,at least in the current time and near future, a reality that cannot be changed .These different forces and military formations ,with diverse ideological ,political ,and regional affiliations ,cannot be integrated under the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior ,as specified in many agreements signed between political parties in recent years.

The emphasis that the NSF fall under the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces ,as reserve forces ,indicates the presence of many obstacles hindering the integration of all military formations .Particularly since their leaders have become members of the PLC that governs the country ,and the president of this council is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces .This means that the state of division will remain and continue ,and even will be reinforced by military force for each party represented in the Council .If the state of division and conflict seems so clear ,and involves a significant degree of risks and concerns ,at the highest and most important official institution in power) ,PLC ,(then these concerns and issues will likely be even more prominent in other institutions and levels of power.

Members and leaders of the NSF come from various southern regions ,while a large number of them belong to the Salafist movement ,there are also non-Salafist members .At present ,the NSF consists of around eight military brigades ,with expectations be fifteen brigades in the near future.

**Overall ,it can be noted that the NSF's 'Units and Brigades are deployed across multiple areas and governorates as follows:-**

1. The 1st and 4th Brigades are deployed in Lahj.
2. The 2nd and 3rd Brigades are deployed in Abyan - Al Bayda.
3. The 5th Brigade is deployed in Valley of Hadramout. The NSF has expanded to include two main military divisions, the First Division and the Second Division.
4. The 6th Brigade is deployed in Aden and Abyan.
5. The 7th Brigade is deployed in Al-Dhale'e.
6. The deployment of the 8th Brigade is not known, but sources expect it supports Al-Dhale'e fronts.



## Enhancing Presence in Lahj and Hadramout

In late April, the NSF took control of military positions and battlefronts against the Houthi rebels, which were previously under the control of forces affiliated to the STC. These areas include northern parts of Lahj and southern parts of Taiz. Over the past few weeks, the NSF has deployed significant military reinforcements to support and supply these battlefronts, successfully repelling several Houthi attacks. On May 18, the STC shot down a Houthi-affiliated drone in Hifan front, a district located in south of Taiz.

In northern and western parts of Lahj Governorate Subaihi tribe inhabit, including the General Commander of the STC, Brigadier Bashir Al-Madhrabi al-Subaihi, and other leaders. The Subaihi tribes have thousands of armed fighters who have actively participated in the war against the Houthis. They played a pivotal role in driving Houthis out of Aden, Lahj, and the Al-Anad military base. They have also effectively participated in liberating districts along the western coast from Bab al-Mandab to the outskirts of Hodeida. Subaihi tribesmen also have formed several brigades within the Giants Forces led by Abdulrahman Al-Mahrami, a member of the PLC. However, since the establishment of the NSF, a large number of Subaihi fighters, especially those belonging to the Saudi-supported Salafist movement, have been recruited in these forces.

Therefore, the presence of the NSF in key battlefronts can serve as a starting point for them to expand their control and influence in other areas and battlefronts, particularly those fronts and governorates that have gained special importance in the recent times. Currently, the NSF is present in Aden, Lahj, Abyan, Dhale'e, Shabwa, Hadramout, and near the official Wadi'a border crossing with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

At the beginning this year, the NSF sought to establish a foothold in Mukalla, the capital city of Hadramout. It has been under the influence of the UAE since 2016 following the expulsion of Al-Qaeda from the city and other coastal districts, which had been previously controlled by the organization for almost a year.

However, the local forces affiliated with Abu Dhabi, particularly the Elite Forces and the STC, opposed the NSF's advancement towards the coastal districts of Hadramout and threatened to escalate the situation. They didn't allow military units belong to the NSF to enter Mukalla. Although the directives of the governor of Hadramout Mubarak bin Mahdi, and the command of Second Military Region and the Security and Police of the Coast of Hadramout to facilitate the passage of 55 five military vehicles to Mukalla, the Hadrami Elite forces and the STC, backed by the UAE, rejected the directives and threatened to escalation. [3]. A protest march supporting the Hadrami Elite Forces, affiliated with the STC, took place, considering any force's arrival in Mukalla a threat to the Elite Forces.



In response ,the NSF considered this reaction ,under the pretext of defending the Hadrami elite ,as a misplaced effort .In a statement released by their media office ,the NSF stated“ No one is targeting the Hadrami Elite ,and media is fabricating discord that does not exist ”.The statement added that“ the attempt to make people believe that the NSF is targeting Hadrami Elite in Mukalla is completely illogical .Both the Elite and the NSF belong to Hadramout ,and any attempt to divide them is baseless[4]”

### **Saudi Support and Emirati Concern-:**

Since the formation of the NSF ,they have received ongoing support from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ,the leader of the Arab coalition which support the Yemeni legitimacy. This support includes financial aid ,armaments ,training ,and other forms of assistance .In contrast ,the Emiratis and their local proxies in southern and eastern Yemen have expressed their concerns .This can be observed in statements and media reports from individuals and institutions aligned with the Emirati agenda.

For example ,the Emirati newspaper” Al Arab ,”based in London ,has published several reports inciting against the NSF .Sometimes ,it discusses the financial aid they receive from Saudi Arabia” ,despite the crisis ,according to the newspaper’s commentary.[5]” Other times ,it labels them as“ the Muslim Brotherhood’s front in Yemen ,targeting STC .[6]”The accusations of affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood are prominent in Emirati political and media discourse ,as well as among their local allies .This accusation is often used to undermine any party considered to be a rival .It has been directed at various forces and parties ,including those who oppose the Muslim Brotherhood.

Emirati media coverage often attempts to connect the NSF to Saudi support ,for example ,pictures of Saudi leaders visiting NSF camps are published ,indicating a strong connection between the forces and their financiers .The Emirati media describes them as” Yemeni forces with a Saudi marks ”.However ,the hostile discourse against the NSF does not continue to escalate ,because the UAE and its proxies fear angering Saudi Arabia ,which still holds significant influence in Yemen .They understand that escalating tensions at this time would not be in their best interest ,so friendly statements towards the NSF are occasionally said.

It seems that Abu Dhabi’s concern is related to the potential expansion of the NSF’s control at the expense of the influence and control of the local forces aligned with Emiratis .This concern arises from the fact that the new forces bear the marks of Saudi support ,suggesting that the expansion would align with Saudi objective ,ultimately undermining Emirati influence .This is particularly significant in the areas of competition and rivalry that have attracted regional and international powers during the war and armed conflicts in Yemen.

**Significance and Consequences:-**

The formation of the NSF carries several significances based on the current reality and the nature of conflicts, as well as the United Nations' mediation efforts between the legitimate government and the Arab coalition on one hand, and the Houthi group on the other.

The first significance of this formation is linked to the allegiance of the new forces to Dr. Rashad al-Alimi, the President of the PLC. Therefore, any expansion of these forces increases the President's sphere of influence, especially when he is in the interim capital, Aden. The current situation in Aden keeps the president almost isolated from the military forces loyal to him as the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces. Because these forces in Aden are under the control of the STC, which was established by the United Arab Emirates. UAE also established these armed formations that control also most governorates in southern Yemen.

Undoubtedly, the presence of well-disciplined and trained military forces could provide protection and security for the President, particularly if the NSF is assigned the task. However, this might raise concerns among the president's partners (adversaries) loyal to Abu Dhabi, who have shown a desire to sever ties with any opposite party. This partnership has already led to armed conflict, as happened in Aden itself in 2018 and 2019. The STC thinks that these conflicts have resulted in control over Aden, which means that all tasks, including protecting and securing the members of the Presidential Council, including the President himself- have been entrusted to STC military and security units. For this purpose, the STC has renamed some military units to match the tasks assigned to them after expelling the government forces from Aden. For example, the forces that controlled the presidential palace, previously known as "Storm Forces" are now called "Presidential Storm" as they have replaced the Presidential Protection Forces, which used to protect and secure President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. By adding "Presidential" to Storm, they become the only authorized forces that protect the presidential headquarters and everything related to the presidency.

While some observers interpret the handover of a number of military places and frontlines by the STC in northern Lahj to the NSF forces as an indication of the latter's expanding influence, others believe that the STC's withdrawal from the Houthi war frontlines relieves it of any obligation towards these areas, which are targeted by Houthi from time to time. It seems that the STC aims to deploy its forces to other areas and fronts, excluding those against the Houthis. The STC leaders have learned during the past period that the battlefronts of fighting against the Houthis involve more losses than gains.

The STC's concerns regarding the growing presence and expansion of the NSF is clearly observed ,particularly in the most important areas ,such as Aden ,Shabwa ,and the coast of Hadramout .The STC's escalation against the NSF forces when the latter attempted to establish a camp in Mukalla evidently indicates these concerns .Moreover ,concerns were not limited to the STC and the Elite Forces ;even the United Arab Emirates has expressed concerns ,especially since Riyadh plays a significant role in the formation and funding of the NSF.

Another concern for the STC is the decision of their members to abandon their armed formations and join the NSF ,especially if the support and monthly salaries for the NSF are consistently paid ,which the STC forces lack ,as their soldiers suffer from salary cuts for several months.

Regarding the local circumstances and events ,the formation of the NSF cannot be separated from the external situation ,especially the regional dynamic and the possibility of reaching a political settlement that would end the war and lead to a new political and military reality .This gives these forces importance for both the Presidential Council and Riyadh ,as the latter is the main supporter of both ,the PLC and the NSF.

## Conclusion

The formation of the NSF takes place in difficult circumstances related to the conflict within the legitimate military institution .This situation raises an additional concern regarding the presence of the NSF ,especially for the forces that control the interim capital and some southern and eastern) liberated (governorates .However ,it is impossible to determine what will happen to these forces at the present time .The country is going through a stage of uncertainty internally ,with regards to the forces and alliances opposing the Houthi coup ,as well as externally ,regarding the possibility of reaching a political settlement formula in light of the efforts sponsored by United Nations ,which is also supported by regional and international parties .Nevertheless ,it is expected that these new military formations will play a significant role in the future.



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مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث منظمة مجتمع مدني غير ربحي مرخص ، من وزارة الشؤون الاجتماعية اليمنية رقم (436) في 18 أكتوبر 2010م ، يهتم بالقضايا السياسية والفكرية والاعلامية كقضايا الديمقراطية والانتخابات والأحزاب وقضايا الأمن والإرهاب ونشاطات الجماعات الايدلوجية والحريات السياسية والفكرية والصحفية إلى جانب القضايا الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والإنسانية ذات الارتباط بالمتغيرات السياسية.