

Between its territorial conflicts and  
the region's competition for Aden

## What is the future of the Southern Transitional Council?



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## Summary

The study deals in detail with the Southern Transitional Council, the circumstances of its inception, and the factors that helped it to become the most dominant and present faction in a number of southern governorates. It also focuses on reasons behind its strength that enabled it to possess armed militants that confront even the internationally recognized government forces, and forcing them to leave the interim capital, Aden, and several cities and regions in the south.

In terms of extension, discourse, and political performance, the Transitional Council was linked to the Southern Movement, which was launched in 2007 calling for an improvement in the conditions of the military and security forces that were ousted by the Saleh regime in the wake of the 1994 war that President Saleh and his allies resolved at the expense of the Socialist Party.

But there is another factor behind the emergence of the transitional council that was formed in 2017, that is its relationship with the United Arab Emirates, which entered Yemen in 2015 within the Arab coalition countries led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to support the legitimacy. After relationship between the legitimate government and Abu Dhabi deteriorated, the latter proceeded to form and support the Transitional Council, which became its strong card in confronting the government, and putting pressure on Saudi Arabia, if necessary.

The study reveals the points of strength and weakness of the Transitional Council, its relationship to the struggle for power in the past southern Yemen, before unity, and the map of its spread and areas of influence, in contrast to areas that do not interact with its rhetoric and practices. Main determinants related to the war with the Houthis, the position of the Arab coalition, and the new changes in the local, regional and international arenas.

## Preamble:

### The Southern Movement... Starting from the Streets

In May 1990, the unity between North and South Yemen was announced and the Republic of Yemen was formed, but soon differences began to emerge between the two partners of the unity (the General People's Congress party in the north and the Yemeni Socialist Party in the south). It was expected that holding the parliamentary elections in April 1993 would resolve the differences between the two parties, but what happened was the opposite, as differences escalated to a political crisis that lasted about nine months before a two-month war erupted between north and south until it was resolved by President Saleh and his allies. Saleh absolutely controlled the power, while signs of protests began to appear from time to time in the south, either through secret military formations or through peaceful protests.

In 2007, a protest movement appeared in some areas of southern Yemen, led by the military who were subjected to forcible dismissal from their jobs after the 1994 war. However, the movement began to expand, especially in the areas of Al-Dhale and Radfan, and the popular base of the Southern Movement began to include different categories of academics, lawyers, students and journalists. The human rights demands turned into political demands entitled “the southern issue,” and its slogan “the restoration of the southern state” which combined in a unity with the north in 1990.

In 2008 and 2009, a number of political components were formed within the framework of the Southern Movement, including the (National Commission for Liberation and Independence), the Supreme National Council for the Liberation of the South, the Southern Peaceful Struggle Movement, known as Najah, and the Peaceful Struggle Commission.

After the tribal Sheikh Tariq Al-Fadhli, one of the most prominent allies of President Saleh, joined the movement in mid-2009,

he announced the formation of the (Supreme Council for the Peaceful Revolution), a component that later expanded at the expense of other components, especially the council received support from Ali Salem Al-Beidh, the last president of Southern Yemen State before unity. Al-Beidh had left Yemen after his defeat in the 1994 civil war, and settled in the Sultanate of Oman, but he left it immediately after announcing the resumption of political work in Yemen, and settled in the Lebanese capital, Beirut.

After the Yemeni Spring Uprising in 2011, Iran found a favorable opportunity to achieve its goals in Yemen, so it took advantage of the weakness of the central government's control to increase its support for the Houthi group in the north of the country. Politicians, media professionals and activists from various provinces worked within the Iranian agenda that focused its efforts on fighting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by working to thwart the process of political transfer of power in Yemen after the 2011 revolution managed to oust Ali Abdullah Saleh. The power transfer agreement, sponsored by Saudi Arabia under the name the "Gulf Initiative," was signed by the ruling General People's Congress and opposition parties in Riyadh in late 2011

### **War Imposes New Reality:**

The Houthi coup and its takeover of the capital, Sana'a, in September 2014, ended the alliance between Al-Beidh and Iran and the Houthis. Tehran no longer needed Al-Beidh after its Houthi allies took control of power and most of the Yemeni governorates, while Al-Beidh's followers in the south continued to declare that they would not be a party to the war against the Houthis, who rushed to invade more provinces. The position of the Southern Movement remained mostly neutral, but some of its elements engaged in the resistance against the Houthis and participated in the fighting alongside members of the resistance, which included various political and social components, especially in Aden and neighboring provinces.

After Saudi Arabia intervened to confront the Houthi coup and launched a military operation, led by the Arab coalition to support legitimacy, in March 2015, the positions of many supporters of the Southern Movement changed from subordination to Iran and coordinating with the Houthis against Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government into fighting against the Houthi militia until a number of provinces were liberated, especially the temporary capital. Aden.

After the liberation, Aden became under the control of the UAE, which has the greatest influence in the Arab coalition after Saudi Arabia, and it began to win loyalists from supporters of the Southern Movement and the Salafist movement, and worked - in various ways and means - to exclude the leaders of the resistance loyal to the legitimate government. The UAE supported its followers with money and weapons, and practiced pressure on President Hadi to absorb a number of the UAE allies in the State's institutions. Some of them even took high positions in the central government and local authorities, such as the hard-line Salafist Hani bin Brik, who was appointed as Minister of State without a portfolio, and the military commander Aidarous al-Zubaidi, who was appointed as governor of Aden in December 2015 succeeding governor Jaafar Mohamed Saad, who was assassinated with a car bomb attack.

Since 2016, the UAE has started building paramilitary formations, most of which are Salafis, and called this force the "security belt" in the governorates of Aden, Lahj, Abyan, and Al-Dhalea, and the "elite" in Hadramawt, Shabwa and Socotra. These formations operate outside the Yemeni General Staff, and the UAE began to use them in achieving its goals and carrying out reprisals against its opponents, such as burning the headquarters of parties and newspapers, prosecuting activists, and kidnapping resistance leaders, politicians and civil organizations activists.<sup>[1]</sup>

## **The Formation of the Transitional Council and Confronting the Legitimate Government:**

Despite the UAE's entry into the Arab coalition in support of the Yemeni legitimacy, the relationship between the two sides quickly became tense.

The Yemeni government, for its part, remained silent about practices of the UAE and its armed formations, because it prioritizes the military confrontation with the Houthi coup, and/or because it is under pressure.

As for Abu Dhabi, it was clear that it had adopted a policy of revenge against President Hadi and his government, and begun working to undermine the legitimate authority by marginalizing it and weakening its presence, even expelling it from Aden and the southern governorates, and instructing the local forces loyal to it to rebel against the internationally recognize government of President Hadi and to reject his decisions. Finally, the UAE prevented President Hadi's plane from landing at Aden airport after returning from Saudi Arabia in February 2017 forcing him to change the plane's itinerary to the Socotra Island.

In late April 2017, the President of the Republic issued two decisions, the first to dismiss the governor of Aden, Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, from his position, and the second to dismiss Minister of State Hani Bin Brik and refer him to investigation. The decisions angered the Emirates, so it supported its followers to organize protest rallies, led by al-Zubaidi and bin Brik, in Aden at the beginning of May 2017. The rallies announced the so-called (Aden Historic Declaration), which rejected the decisions of President Hadi, renewed the demand of secession from the north, and announced the mandate of Al-Zubaidi to declare a political leadership (under his leadership) to manage and represent the south.<sup>[2]</sup> One week later, the formation of the Southern Transitional Council was announced under the leadership of Aidarous Al-Zubaidi. The council's presidency includes 26 civilian and military personalities, most of whom were officials, who have been dismissed from their positions, including Salafis from the hard-line Madkhali movement that was co-opted by the UAE and is working for it now.

On November 30, 2017, the Transitional Council announced the formation of the "National Assembly", which serves as a legislative authority of the Council, and is headed by the former governor of Hadhramaut Ahmed Saeed bin Brik. The announcements of the formation of the Transitional Council's branches in the governorates and districts have continued, and areas of Al-Dhalea and Radfan have been represented. Yafe, known as (the Triangle), is a popular base for the Transitional Council,

as the majority of the UAE-backed military and Salafist leaders belong to it, whether in the armed formations or in the leadership structures of the Transitional Council.

## **The Functional Salafism at the Service of Abu Dhabi:**

The Southern Transitional Council included several political blocs, including elements in the Southern Movement that emerged in 2007, as well as partisan elements, some are affiliated with the Socialist Party (the ruling party in the south before unity), others are affiliated with the League of Arab South's Sons, in addition to some affiliated with the General People's Congress Party.

Among the religious currents, the Madkhali Salafist current, which was co-opted by the UAE after the liberation of Aden, and worked to attract its followers and recruit them to camps that it established such as the "Security Belt" that was led by Hani bin Brik, who became the leader of the functional Salafism to serve the UAE interests, so he was chosen as Deputy President of the Southern Transitional Council.

Human rights reports indicate that the Security Belt forces have committed many human rights abuses and violations of public freedoms and rights. They have deported workers, who belong to the northern governorates, especially Taiz governorate, from the city of Aden, and practiced oppression against the opponents of the bin Brik movement, especially the associates of the Islah party, which suffers a reservoir of complex hostility from both the Emirates, the separatist movement, and the Madkhali Salafist movement. Many of the Islah's headquarters were stormed and some of them burned, and a large number of its supporters and members were arrested. Hundreds of opponents of the Bin Brik movement were displaced in secret prisons supervised by the Emirati forces in Aden.<sup>[3]</sup>

Unlike Bin Brik and his current, the moderate Salafists did not have the same favor with the Emiratis, although they (i.e. the moderate Salafis) had a significant presence during the war and the military confrontation with the Houthis. Some members of the moderate Salafists, who had a popular acceptance,



were subjected to assassinations and physical liquidation in a systematic way. Frequent reports indicated that since the liberation of Aden, about 30 imams of mosques have been assassinated, while others were forced to leave Aden and the southern governorates to other regions inside and outside Yemen.

These reports also indicated that the Security Belt forces have carried out massive arrest campaigns among the Salafist movement, which has not declared its loyalty to the Emirates, and these campaigns were often justified by claims of fighting against terrorism and extremist groups.

In the middle of 2019, official documents leaked to the media in Aden revealed the records of the Public Prosecution's investigations with defendants, who confessed of the assassination of Sheikh Samhan Rawi, one of the most prominent symbols of the Salafist movement, and a leader of the resistance against the Houthis, in January 2016. They said that they had received instructions and support from Hani Bin Brik and an Emirati officer to carry out assassinations.

### **Transitional Council: Formation, Components and Loyal Forces**

The Transitional Council is led by a Presidency composed of 26 members, and is considered the highest leadership body in the Council. It was expected that its members would assume the responsibility of the competent departments, as usually happens in the administrative and organizational formations, as the supreme executive body. When the distribution of some departments to members began, such as the political department that was given to Dr. Nasser Al-Khubaji (member of the Yemeni Parliament from the Socialist Party), and the organizational department, headed by a member of the Council Amin Saleh. These procedures were quickly stopped by a statement from the Salafi leader Hani bin Brik, who decided at the time that it was not permissible to combine membership in the Presidency and assume another specialized position.

Observers saw that Bin Brik's decision came under an Emirati instructions aimed at limiting the penetration of the socialist current inside the Transitional Council at the expense of the two currents that are most closely associated with the Emirates, the Salafi current, represented by Hani bin Brik himself,

and the GPC current, represented by Ahmed bin Brik and Ahmed Lamlas - the first one chairs the National Assembly (the Transitional Council's Parliament), and the second one holds the General Secretariat of the Council. Lamlas was appointed as the Governor of Aden in August 2020, however, some heads of departments have been selected from within the council such as Amin Saleh, head of the organizational department, and Lotfi Shatara, who headed the media department, the only department that witnessed changes from time to time, as well as the official spokesman of the council, who was changed more than once. The first one was Salem al-Awlaki, then Nezar Haitham, and then Ali al-Kathiri who is member of the council's presidency.

The appointment decisions often subject to regional considerations, taking into account personal considerations and the extent to which the appointed persons are linked to the senior leaders in the Council or those with influence and power. It seems that the purpose of its formation was to win over some personalities, who were not assimilated into the council's various bodies, branches, and departments.

It was previously mentioned that the Transitional Council includes several political currents, such as the Southern Movement, the Unionist party, the People's Congress and the Socialist Party, in addition to a faction of the Salafi movement, which controls the majority of support and funding from the UAE because it is the most loyal to supporters in Abu Dhabi, followed by the General People's Congress, especially after the dissolution of the alliance of Houthis and Saleh in late 2017 and the withdrawal of GPC-affiliated military, political and media leaders from Sana'a to liberated areas and outside Yemen, and strengthening their connection with the Emiratis.

Although the general discourse of the Southern Transitional Council seems to be mostly unified, there are issues and rhetoric that reveal internal differences related to political affiliations and geographical, intellectual and historical backgrounds. The League of Arab South's Sons party refuses to describe the south as Yemeni,

as it believes that the south has nothing to do with Yemen, and prefers to call the southern governorates as “the Arab South,”<sup>[4]</sup> while statements of the Transitional Council are still talking about southern Yemen, which raises criticism from those affiliated with the League party, which accuses its archenemy, the Socialist Party, of working on what it calls the “South Yemenization,” given that the state that was exist in the south before the unity, and which the Southern Transitional Council seeks to restore, was called the “People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen.”

Geographically, the Southern Transitional Council’s leadership worked to distribute membership of the council between all regions of the south, especially the Presidency and the National Assembly, but later some geographical blocs appeared to be dominant and superior, especially the Yafe and al-Dhale blocs. The two blocs share control over the council, its components, and the military and security formations, with a few exceptions. The events that occurred in the past period widened these imbalances, so the STC’s popularity receded in the southern regions and governorates of great economic and strategic importance, such as Abyan, Shabwa, Hadramout, Mahra, and Al-Sabiha region, in addition to important cities and metropolises such as Aden, whose presence in the Transitional Council and its formations has recently declined significantly. The only leader in the STC’s Security Belt forces from Aden was Wadah Omar Abdulaziz, who was dismissed later and replaced with another young man from Yafe, Jalal Al-Rubaie.

### **The STC’s Confrontations with the government:**

A few months after its establishment, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) has become a state within the state, and it has gained great influence due to the continuous support from the UAE, which controls the decision-making in the Council and supervises its movement and activity, and doubles its support for the STC every time its relation with the government witnesses tension.

Accordingly, in January 2018, the STC declared a state of emergency and threatened to overthrow the government, unless President Hadi agrees to dismiss it. The tension developed into bloody clashes between the STC's forces and the government forces for three days. The clashes were ceased only after intervention by Saudi Arabia. After that, the situation entered a stage of maneuvering between the two parties that continued to exchange accusations, and then tensions between the two parties erupted in Shabwa and Socotra, and at a lower level in other regions of the south.<sup>[5]</sup>

About two months after Abu Dhabi announced the withdrawal of its forces from Yemen in June 2019, violent confrontations erupted between government forces and the STC's forces following the killing of the leader in the Security Belt, Munir al-Yafei (Abu al-Yamamah) with a missile that targeted a military rally held in the west of Aden in early August 2019. Although the Houthis adopted the operation, the Transitional Council accused the legitimate government of targeting al-Yafei.<sup>[6]</sup> The Vice-President of the Council, Hani bin Brik, announced the general mobilization and marching to the presidential palace of Maashiq in Aden, and raised the slogan of purifying the south from the legitimacy, which the STC accused of loyalty and subjection to the Islah party. After three days of confrontations, Saudi Arabia intervened and withdrew Minister of Interior at the time Ahmed Al-Maysari, who was leading the confrontations against the STC, which led to the latter's control of Aden.<sup>[7]</sup> Then, the STC forces moved towards the city of Zanjibar, the capital of Abyan governorate, and managed to take it over and expelled the government forces from it.

The matter was not limited to Aden and Abyan. Days after the control of Aden and Zanjibar in Abyan, the UAE-affiliated Shabwa Elite forces began working to control the city of Ataq, the capital of Shabwa, but the elite forces were strongly confronted by the government forces so that the battles moved from Ataq to the rest of Shabwa regions. The elite forces were successively defeated by the government forces, which announced the complete liberation of Shabwa from the elite forces on August 26, 2019.<sup>[8]</sup>



On August 29, 2019, the government forces regained control of Abyan governorate and headed to the entrances of Aden to restore it from the STC coup, but they were surprised by aerial bombardment by Emirati planes, which led to the killing and wounding of nearly 300 members of the government's army. The rest of the army forces had to withdraw to the east, while the STC forces rushed to control the western parts of Abyan and tightened its control over Aden<sup>[9]</sup>

In turn, the Yemeni government accused the UAE of being behind the "military rebellion" of the Transitional Council, which resulted in its control of the camps, government institutions and the temporary capital, Aden, and the ensuing confrontations in the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa. The government submitted an official complaint to the UN Security Council denouncing the UAE's bombing of its forces, and demanding a special session to discuss what it described as the UAE's intervention in Yemen's affairs<sup>[10]</sup>

## **Observers attribute the failure of the Transitional Council in Shabwa confrontations to several reasons, including:**

- \* The societal nature of Shabwa is a complex tribal nature, and most of the tribes reject the Emirati role, and a large number of tribesmen, who are involved in the Shabwani elite, refused to fight tribesmen involved in the government forces for fears of "reprisal actions". The governor of Shabwa Mohamed bin Adyo, officials, and leaders in the governorate played a major role in promoting tolerance and reconciliation, and not being drawn into conflicts and wars.
- \* The existence of supply lines for the government forces from Bayhan and the third military region within its scope, unlike Aden, which was besieged by forces loyal to the UAE.

\* The speech and actions of the Transitional Council seemed to be hostile and regionally racist against the people of the northern governorates, and some southern governorates, which is not commensurate with the nature of tribes in Shabwa, which has a great societal overlap and interdependence with the neighboring northern governorates such as Al-Bayda and Marib, and the Shabwani tribes' rejection of the racist behavior practiced by the Transitional against innocent citizens.

\* Shabwa is an oil-rich province and has a major port for exporting the liquefied gas, so the controlling of the province will provide the STC with huge revenues, which will enable it to continue fighting against the legitimate government, something that President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi does not want, nor does Saudi Arabia, which considers Shabwa as the gateway to the eastern region (Hadhramout and Mahra), where Saudi Arabia seeks to extend its influence..

### **The Riyadh Agreement:**

On November 5, 2019, the Riyadh Agreement between the legitimate government and the Southern Transitional Council was signed, after almost two months of conflict between the two parties. The agreement stipulates the participation of the STC in the government's delegation to any consultations on a political solution to end the Houthi coup, in addition to the formation of a government of political competencies in which the portfolios will be divided equally between the northern and southern governorates. With regard to military arrangements, the agreement stipulates the assembling and transferring of medium and heavy weapons of various types from all military and security forces and placing them under the management and supervision of the coalition, and pulling out all forces affiliated with the government and the STC from Aden, with the exception of the First Brigade of the Presidential Protection forces to protect the President and the STC's leadership.

The agreement also stipulates the inclusion of armed forces of the two parties in the Ministry of Defense, as well as the reorganization of the government security forces and formations affiliated with the STC and including them under the control of the Ministry of Interior. According to the agreement, the Special Forces and counterterrorism units in Aden should be led by new personalities to be selected from the governmental and the STC.

However, the southern governorates continued to live in a state of tension and mutual escalation, and the terms of the agreement did not go into effect, with the exception of some political arrangements that were implemented nearly a year after the signing of the agreement, such as the formation of the government and the appointment of a governor and security director for Aden.

However, the implementation of the military and security aspects of the agreement is still hampered, and the situation remained the same, especially since the government, which returned to Aden in late 2020, found itself helpless and weak under the control of the STC. The government decided to leave for Riyadh about three months after its arrival in Aden, and the STC forces continued to control Aden in light of the deterioration of the economic and living conditions, the political tension, and the exchange of accusations between the two parties regarding the delay in implementing the Riyadh Agreement.

In April 2020, the Southern Transitional Council declared a state of emergency and “self-administration” in Aden and other southern governorates, and the formation of monitoring committees over the state institutions, which the government considered “an explicit declaration to end the Riyadh Agreement and a continuation of armed rebellion that began in August 2019.”

For its part, the local authorities in six southern governorates, out of eight governorates, declared their loyalty to President Hadi and the legitimate government and rejected the STC’s self-administration declaration that was considered as a rebellion against the Riyadh Agreement.<sup>[11]</sup> At the regional and international level, the Arab Coalition and a number of countries and regional and international organizations rejected the STC’s declaration of “self-administration.”

The list of those rejecting the declaration at that time included the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Egypt, the UAE, Britain, the Arab League, and the European Union.

The declaration was also met with an internal official and popular rejection in the liberated governorates, despite the media propaganda and money spent by the STC and promises it made to improve public services, pay salaries and end crises. The reality was in contrast to all promises that coincided with the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID- 19) that has spread to Aden and the liberated governorates, with a continuous deterioration in basic services, especially health services, which led to the announcement of Aden as a disaster city, especially after official statistics revealed that the number of deaths in the city due to Corona and other diseases amounted to 623 deaths during the first half of 2020.

In May 2020, the STC authorities did not provide any remedy but only seized financial resources, including the port of Aden, taxes, banks, and others.

The looting of resources expanded the scope of discontent against the STC, and created a state of internal conflict and accusations exchange between leaders of the council. As a result, the STC secretly formed committees for internal investigation. The committees did not announce any results, but sources confirmed the widespread looting carried out by leaders and officials affiliated with the STC based on the declaration of the self-administration. Until this moment, the accusation of embezzlement is pursuing a number of them, and if all leaders were subject to accountability and a comprehensive investigation, many facts would have been revealed.

There are many facts on this subject, especially since the STC, during the period of the declaration, considered itself as a government and formed committees to conduct business and monitor various government sectors. It also formed an economic committee comprising various disciplines and administrative, service and other fields, while there was no supervisory body to monitor the committee's performance.



Although the UAE announced its rejection of the STC self-administration, it continued its support for the council disclosing its true position. The issuance of the declaration was made by the STC's leaders who reside in the UAE in light of a clear failure to implement the Riyadh Agreement, and tension in relationship between the STC and the Saudi military leaders charged with implementing the Riyadh Agreement, especially with regard to the withdrawal of heavy weapons from Aden.

This is what most of Saudi writers and politicians, who appeared on the media outlets and social media, realized in support of their country's position rejecting the declaration and considering it as a coup against the Riyadh Agreement. They also condemned the Emirati position in support of the STC's steps, as an act that aimed to thwart the Riyadh Agreement by a country that is considered the most prominent ally of Saudi Arabia.

After the STC announced the start of its self-administration in the south, the security and military forces loyal to it rushed to take control of the rest of the state's institutions, branches of ministries, and government facilities that were not under its control. They controlled main resources, including the Aden port revenues. The basic services, including drinking water and electricity, deteriorated, and the health conditions got to worse due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, the number of deaths and infections increased, while the STC's elements were satisfied with suppressing protests carried out by citizens to denounce the deterioration of living conditions in a way they had never seen before.

In late July 2020, Saudi Arabia intervened once again and its efforts resulted in an agreement on a mechanism to speed up the complete implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. The STC announced that it completely abandoned the "self-administration", as a condition set by the government, in exchange for sitting on the table to discuss the acceleration mechanism for implementing the Riyadh Agreement.

## The STC escalation and international rejection

In contrary to the previous times in which the Transitional Council's steps were met with silence by the Arab coalition and the major countries, the STC escalation in May, June and July 2021 did not go unnoticed. The STC received strong responses and warnings of confrontation with the international community unless it stops its escalation. These positions began with a statement from Saudi Foreign Ministry that announced its rejection of the escalatory steps by the Transitional, and stressed the Kingdom's commitment to implement the Riyadh Agreement. Then another statement was issued by the Gulf Cooperation Council supporting Riyadh's position. More statements followed from the US State Department, the British and French ambassadors to Yemen. All statements declared their rejection of the STC's steps that were described as "provocative."

It is clear that there are two visions on the part of the STC to deal with the Riyadh Agreement. The first vision is to deal with it flexibly and positively, especially in the political and media aspects, as the STC considers it as a temporary and necessary stage to win Saudi Arabia and the foreign public opinion for a while and then it can renounce all obligations when it gets the opportunity to return to the escalation square against the agreement and the Arab Coalition. The other vision is adopted by a hardline current within the Southern Transitional Council that absolutely rejects the agreement because it came out under Saudi pressure. This current believes that the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement, especially the security and military aspects, may weaken the STC and deprive it of its armed forces.

The escalatory steps by the STC include the formation of new military and security units, in an explicit attempt to escape the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. The STC leadership issued decisions to appoint members in military and security positions that are supposed to be affiliated with the Ministries of Interior and Defense according to the provisions of the Riyadh Agreement. It also issued a decision to form a counterterrorism unity, while the Riyadh Agreement stipulates that the counterterrorism forces would be formed through the official State's agencies.

The STC escalation obstructed steps to implement the Riyadh Agreement again, so Saudi Arabia worked to gather the two parties in Riyadh in order to resume the implementation procedures. However, the STC escalated the situation last June by pushing its elements in Shabwa governorate to confront the security services and create chaos, but the local authority and the security services were able to quell those movements.

Monitors of the situation see that the STC's attempts to blow up the situation in Shabwa and the Houthi attack on Bayhan are related to each other, as it came after the local authority in Shabwa demanded the departure of the UAE forces from Balhaf facility. Abu Dhabi supported its loyalists and the Houthis to target Shabwa in response to protests that called for the evacuation of Emirati forces from Balhaf facility, which has become unable to resume operation to support the national economy due to the UAE presence.

### **The STC and the legacy of conflict:**

According to Western monitors, the confrontations between the government and the Transitional Council in the years (2017-2020), were closely related to the conditions of internal fighting that characterized the period of the southern state before the unity, where the conflicts within the ruling Socialist Party resulted from ideological differences or traditional regional or tribal rivalries. The conflicts led to the unconstitutional overthrow of top leaders in 1969 and 1978, most notably 1986 conflict that was the longest and the bloodiest one.

In the status quo struggle, the signatories to the Riyadh Agreement are largely divided into the same two factions that fought each other in the 1986 conflict. The STC is the successor to the group that continued to rule the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, most of whom are from Lahj and Al-Dhale governorates, called 'Tughma'. On the other hand, President Hadi and many of his ministers have roots in the faction that includes members mainly from Abyan and Shabwa governorates, called 'Zumra', who fled to Sana'a after their defeat in 1986.<sup>[12]</sup>

Sources in the European Union indicate that European countries have tried to encourage various separatist movements to reorganize them into a manageable number of organizations with clear goals, but they failed. This included a series of meetings in Abu Dhabi, Amman, Beirut, Cairo, and European capitals, attended by various groups of southern leaders and their followers (the last of which was held in Brussels in December 2019). Those leaders may attend follow-up meetings, but they are not constantly able to agree on even short-term programs. While all of them call for either the self-government of the south within a unified Yemen or the complete return to an independent southern state with its pre-1990 borders. As soon as any group of separatist organizations issue a statement, some of the signatories immediately issue a denial statement. Observers conclude that this chaos is the result of their lack of basic policies, and none of them offered any social, economic, or other program beyond calls for secession. It is also the result of their narrow-minded goals that serve the leaders but ignore the needs of the people, including their supporters, all of whom suffer from instability and sharp economic problems.<sup>[13]</sup>

In addition to the STC's association with previous conflicts, it is currently perpetuating more conflicts, as forces associated with the council - in line with ambitions of their Emirati patrons - launch frequent attacks on individuals linked to competing political groups, especially the Islah party. With assistance from local forces, the UAE could maintain secret prisons, tortured detainees and held them without trial for long periods. The UAE hired foreign mercenary groups to assassinate Islah members and other opponents.<sup>[14]</sup>



## The Southern Transitional Council's Pillars:

The STC relies on basic foundations in strengthening its presence and attempting to expand, including claiming the legitimacy of comprehensive geographical representation of the southerners and adopting the southern cause, and considering itself the sole and exclusive representative of the southern governorates, accusing its opponents of treason and considering them as enemies and conspirators against the south and its cause. It also relies on armed formations which extended its control over Aden, Lahj, Al-Dhale and part of Abyan, as the strongest arm that enables the STC to expand its areas of control, and through it the STC can also threaten to wage war on the legitimate government, confuse its institutions, obstruct its work, and undermine its presence, if necessary. These threats are expressed by the STC from time to time with the aim of putting pressure on the Arab Coalition and the government to obtain some gains or ease pressures it faces. The transitional has a broad popular base that it has always used to display its strength, especially during the founding period when it organized a number of mass events in order to prove that it had a strong popular incubator that is difficult to overcome. The factors behind the STC's power include the following:

**The armed formations, established by the Emirates in Aden and other governorates, extend their control over the STC areas of influence and receive directions from Emirati officials, who are the actual supervisors, while the nominal subordination remains to the STC leadership, which also receives instructions from the Emirati officials. The most prominent units of the military and security formations affiliated with the STC are:**

- The Security Belt and Support Forces (controlled by the Yafe region), and the Salafi Hani bin Brik is one of the founders of these units, and he is responsible for recruiting members of Al-Qaeda within the Security Belt forces, as almost 250 of al-Qaeda militants were included in the Security Belt forces.<sup>[15]</sup>

- The 1st Infantry Brigade in Jabal Hadid, led by Abu Omar Al-Dhalei (most of its members are from Al-Dhale province, and some of them trained in Iran and Lebanon).
- The 15th Thunderbolt Brigade - led by Mohamed Qasim al-Zubaidi, brother of Aidarous al-Zubaidi, before it was led by Abu Akram al-Hamshari, director of al-Zubaidi's office (most of its leaders and bases are from al-Dhale, and some of them trained in Iran and Lebanon).
- Resistance Brigades, located in Al-Dhale, led by Shallal Shaye, the former director of Aden security.
- Forces of the Al-Asefa, led by Awsan Al-Anshali (from Al-Dhale and some of them trained in Iran and Lebanon)
- Aden security forces and counterterrorism forces, estimated at 5,000 soldiers. These forces, led by Yusran Maqtari, are accused of human rights violations, including premeditated killing, arrests, torture, and assassinations.<sup>[16]</sup>
- Shabwani and Hadhrami Elite Forces.
- Some units of the Fourth Military Region, including Al-Anad axis and Al-Dhale axis
- Some units of the Giants Brigades, led by Abu Zara'a Al-Mahrami Al-Yafei.
- The necessary support and funding to lure influential and effective personalities and organize meetings, visits and various activities through which the STC presents itself as a de facto authority. In addition to the high salaries leaders of the STC receive, there is a huge budget for activities and business management.<sup>[17]</sup>

Media: The Southern Transitional Council currently owns a satellite channel called the Independent Aden Channel, a local radio station, dozens of newspapers and websites, and hundreds of activists on social media pages. The Council has a National Media Authority that includes media elements trusted by prominent leaders in the Council.

- In order to strengthen its authority and weaken its opponents, the STC established entities and professional federations in various fields and sectors, whose mission is to implement the UAE agenda, including the Judges Club, which has been working for a long time to disrupt the work of the official judicial institutions. It closed courts and prosecutions, and the Southern Teachers Union to disrupt education for nearly two years by exploiting the conditions and circumstances experienced by the liberated governorates. These components enjoy financial support, media coverage, and material capabilities, including the military and security guards that are used to achieve their goals.
- The STC's Department of Foreign Relations represent the Council in a number of countries, whose mission is to promote the STC and Emirati projects and attack opponents in the legitimate government. Each month, one or two persons are responsible for each of these offices in the United States, the Russian Federation, Germany, Britain, and France. Due to support these offices receive and their association with the public relations companies, the Department of Foreign Relations appears to be the most important among the STC's departments.

### **The Southern Transitional Council's Weaknesses:**

Although the Transitional Council receives huge support, it suffers from many weaknesses, some of which are related to the nature of its composition and formation, which include a mixture of contradictory currents that are only united at the point of loyalty to the UAE and receiving support and directions from it.

Other points of weakness are related to the daily practices of its leaders, elements and successive failures in areas of its control in southern Yemen, on top of which is the temporary capital, Aden. The most prominent weaknesses include:

- Dependency on Emirati supporters and mentors in Abu Dhabi.
- Its lack of a popular incubator, especially in Aden, and this was revealed by the popular protests that took place in Aden in September 2021, as thousands of protesters called for the expulsion of the STC and its forces, and the reactions from the STC forces confirmed its weakness and the decline of its popularity, which was recently limited to armed formations.
- The geographical and regional imbalance within the Council in favor of two geographical regions, namely Yafe and Al-Dhale, at the expense of governorates that have economic resources, and political and strategic importance, and a strong and cohesive social structure, such as Hadramawt, Shabwa, Abyan and Al-Mahra, in addition to the city of Aden and Al-Sabiha region, which suffer from the STC's marginalization and citizens there are subjected to continuous attacks by the STC's forces. This is why many members of the STC leave the council and submit resignations on an almost daily basis, confirming the existence of imbalance, despite the STC's claims that it represents all southerners and the southern cause.
- The insistence to restore the past enmities, conflicts and tragedies in a way that raises concerns about the future, as happened in the two rounds of conflict triggered by the transitional in Aden in January 2018, and in August 2019, and the Abyan war in May, June, and July 2020, in addition to conflicts and armed confrontations in Shabwa, Socotra, and other areas.



- The plundering of the public and private properties and resources by force under various justifications.
- The continuous violations of human rights, including killing, breaking into houses, kidnapping, arresting, disappearing, torturing prisoners, abusing freedoms, and mistreatment at the STC-run security checkpoints and secret prisons, in addition to accusations against the STC of carrying out assassinations against opinion leaders and community symbols and campaigns of racial discrimination have contributed significantly to the public resentment among residents of the southern governorates against the council.
- The mismanagement and presenting negative examples in civil, security, and military positions, and exploiting capabilities to achieve personal gains.
- The contradiction in the political and media discourse and the confusion in decisions that was clear in the termination of its self-administration declaration, despite repeated statements that it will never turn back the declaration, regardless of pressures.
- The disagreement with and hostility against the prominent founders of the Southern Movement, who consider the STC as an Emirati tool for pressure as it does not have its own decision. Among these leaders is MG Nasser al-Nuba, head of the Pensioners Authority, the late Brigadier General Ali Muhammad al-Saadi, the prominent leader and founder of the movement, the leader Hassan Baoum, head of the Supreme Revolutionary Council, and Abdul Karim Al-Saadi, head of the Civil Forces Assembly, in addition to former southern leaders like Ali Nasser Mohammed, Haider Al-Attas, and Mohammad Ali Ahmed.

- The military force that follows the STC depends on the UAE's support and financing, and if Abu Dhabi stops support for some reason, the council will lose its cover, and it will be unable to meet its obligations towards its bases and supporters, and may need to search for another supporter and financier or accept the fading and melting of its power. It will also find itself unable to reconcile its parts that have gathered under the luster and influence of the Emirati funds.
- Double loyalty to its leaders, as some of them are loyal to Saudi Arabia and others to the Emirates. Some of them are still in contact with Iran. This status created a regional anxiety that was reflected on the security of the STC-controlled areas, which increased the intensity of competition, race, and regional conflict over Aden and neighborhoods. This was the reason behind the outbreak of armed clashes between two STC-affiliated factions in Crater of Aden on the first day of October 2021.

## The Future of the Southern Transitional Council:

**We can realize the reality of the Southern Transitional Council and forecasted its future in light of some determinants as follows:**

### First: the Riyadh Agreement

Since the signing of the Riyadh Agreement, the fate of the STC has been largely linked to the success or failure of the agreement that gave the council the legitimacy to exist in Aden as a fait accompli. The agreement obligates the STC to include its forces under the Defense and Interior Ministries and to pull out its forces and medium and heavy weaponry from the city of Aden. The Saudi efforts were usually impeded by the rejection of the Southern Transitional Council and its loyal military and security leaders, while the government forces expressed their commitment to the implementation of the agreement. Even if Saudi authorities did not talk about the STC's position,

the STC's behaviors were clear to show its position that rejects the full implementation of the terms of the agreement.

Although the success of the agreement gives the Transitional Council the opportunity to remain as a semi-armed force and a partner in the government in many fateful files and decisions, there are fears within the council that the implementation of the agreement may weaken and disperse its forces, change its military leaders and integrate them into the government forces, which means the marginalizing of its affiliates.

But if the agreement fails, an internal regional war in the southern governorates may break out, as an expected result of the STC's behaviors, and its accusations and incitements against certain southern governorates and regions. The Southern Transitional Council has failed to find a popularity in Shabwa, Hadramawt, Mahra, and Abyan. The August 2019 events in Shabwa, Abyan and Aden revealed the weakness of the STC and the fragility of its strength, as thousands of its members fled their camps before the battle erupted. Had it not been for the intervention by the UAE through bombing the government forces on the outskirts of Aden, the STC forces would have retreated, or have collapsed completely.

**In light of this determinant (the Riyadh Agreement), several scenarios are expected:**

**The First Scenario:** pressure from Riyadh on the government and the STC to seriously engage in the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement in order to reach stability in Aden and other liberated southern governorates, the resumption of the work of the government's institutions in those governorates to perform its duties in, as well as the unifying of ranks to fight against the Houthi group to achieve the main goal, that is the restoration of the state and its institutions and ending the Houthi coup.

However, there are local and regional obstacles. Some Yemeni and non-Yemeni parties and forces stand against this scenario, especially since these forces have become dependent on conflicts and aggravating the situation in the liberated areas. So it is not in their interest to end tension and normalize the situation.

**The second scenario:** the explosion of the military situation between the government and the Southern Transitional Council. The repercussion will be the financial and human depletion of the two parties, and this only serves the Houthi group and gives it a new opportunity to expand its control in the southern areas at the expense of the government and the Transitional Council, especially in Al-Dhale, Abyan, and Shabwa.

**The Third Scenario:** the state of stalemate in the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement will remain without announcing the end of the agreement. This keeps the state of tension, stalking and the exchange of accusations between the two parties in light of a decline in the Saudi interest in the implementation of the agreement in favor of issues and files that are more urgent for Riyadh, while maintaining the Saudi presence in the south through the leadership of the Arab coalition forces in Aden, or through the support centers and programs in a number of liberated governorates, foremost of which is Aden.

**The Fourth Scenario:** the reduction of the legitimacy's influence, while the armed militia remains as a fait accompli. The increasing cases of Houthi military escalation in the south and east, with the achievement of some victories and controlling new areas, as happened in Nihm, east of the capital, Sana'a, and expanding in Al-Jawf governorate at the expense of government forces, coinciding with targeting the government institutions and economic establishments in the liberated areas,

may be an indication of serious attempts to reduce the legitimate government's influence to put more pressure on it to accept half-solutions, either partially in the form of the Riyadh Agreement or entirely in reaching a comprehensive peace agreement with the Houthis to stop the war, with keeping the armed formations in the north (the Houthi group) and in the south (the Southern Transitional Council) as a fait accompli.

## **Second: Emirati support**

The Southern Transitional Council has been associated with the UAE support in light of tense relationship between the legitimate Yemeni government and the UAE and in the context of pressure and blackmail against the government, which means that the STC is just a card that Abu Dhabi moved in order to achieve gains in southern Yemen. Therefore the fate of the STC is linked to a major degree to the future of Emirati support, and any change in Abu Dhabi's foreign policy towards Yemen will have direct effects on the future of the Transitional Council. The UAE's support for the Transitional is not limited to material support only, but also includes providing political and media cover, and employing its capabilities to present the STC leaders to ambassadors, diplomats and representatives of regional and international organizations in external tours and meetings.

## **Third: Relationship between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi**

Riyadh remains the most important regional actor in the Yemeni scene, despite the stumbling and failure of its intervention in the Yemeni war for the seventh year in a row. When the UAE was the most important ally of Saudi Arabia in the Yemeni file, and with a green light from the Kingdom, Abu Dhabi was able to weave strong relations with Yemeni local allies.



In the event that Riyadh changed its position towards Abu Dhabi, this will undoubtedly affect the situation of the Yemeni forces affiliated with the UAE, foremost of which is the Southern Transitional Council. The effect may not be too strong to eliminate the UAE-affiliated forces permanently, but Saudi may start pulling the rug out from under the UAE little by little through other forces and formations to be established by Saudi Arabia.

The UAE and its followers in the Transitional Council benefited from the Gulf crisis when Riyadh, Manama, and Abu Dhabi announced in mid-2017 the severance of relations with Qatar, as relationship between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi was strengthened at the expense of Doha. But the emergence of signs of reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Qatar and the loosening of relationship between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi reflected negatively on the Transitional Council, the Emirati card in southern Yemen. The Transitional Council continued to present itself as a reliable ally of Saudi Arabia and a staunch opponent of Qatar, but with the return of Saudi-Qatari relations to normal, the STC, according to Abu Dhabi, will lose many of its strength factors that it built on ruins of the Gulf disputes. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, which recently seemed to be at odds with the UAE on many issues, will not be more interested in the STC that is considered just a functional tool in the hands of Abu Dhabi to play a prescribed role in a limited time and place.

#### **Fourth: The Fate of War and Settlement Agreement**

The Southern Transitional Council is keen to be present in any upcoming dialogues on the political settlement and ways to stop the war, so this is included in the Riyadh Agreement, as these dialogues will determine the status of all Yemen, especially the south, and the Southern Transitional Council in particular.

Although the STC claims to represent the south, it realizes that other southern forces and currents seek to participate in any dialogue that determines the future of the country. However, the continuation of the war and the decline of chances for peace and settlement are pushing the STC to expand its control over more areas to contest the government and enhance its presence on the ground.

In the event of an agreement is reached to stop the war and enter into negotiations for a political settlement, one of the formulas proposed by the United Nations and its envoys for Yemen, which are mostly visions and perceptions based on the unity of Yemen is likely to be adopted, while allowing for a kind of federalism and expanding the powers of local authorities in the governorates. Thus, the STC will be forced to go one of two ways, either to participate in the political settlement like other political forces and parties or to stay outside the settlement, using its power to impose control over some areas, including the temporary capital, Aden, and to continue provocative actions in neighboring areas, including Shabwa and Hadramawt, or may be in the south of Taiz, depending upon its material and human capabilities.

## Summary:

The status of the Southern Transitional Council remains dependent on the state of conflict and competition between regional powers. The leaders of the Council did not possess the sovereign decision, and did not proceed according to their national interest, otherwise, they would not have relied on regional powers in all their movements since the beginning. They moved between the arms of Iran, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to obtain political, financial and military support. Therefore the most powerful, dominant and influential regional force will inherit Aden through the Southern Transitional Council, which is predicted to disintegrate due to internal conflicts and divisions within it.

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