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The Riyadh Agreement on Yemen: Arrangements and Chances of Success

Unit for Political Studies

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On 5 November 2019 a power-sharing agreement was signed in Riyadh between the Saudi-backed Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi government backed by Saudi Arabia and the Southern Transitional Council supported by the UAE. The document sets forth a range of points and dispensations, most importantly providing for equal government between north and south and the return of PM Moeen Abdelmalek to Aden to get state institutions operational. It also includes three annexes covering a range of political, economic, military and security issues, whose implementation will be overseen by Saudi Arabia.

Firstly: Major points

The agreement was signed after negotiations initiated by Saudi on 11 August 2019 after the STC moved to expel Hadi loyalists from Aden and other southern regions. This section outlines the most important points covered by the agreement.⁽¹⁾

1) State institutions

The agreement provides for various procedures to put state institutions into operation, the most important of which are:

- a. Strengthening the role of Yemeni state institutions and bodies both politically and economically.
- b. Reorganising military forces under the command of the Defence Ministry.
- c. Reorganising security forces under the command of the Interior Ministry.
- d. Commitment to full citizenship rights and an end to regional and sectarian discrimination and division.
- e. An end to the media campaigns currently being fought between the two sides.
- f. A unified military effort under coalition leadership, restoring security and stability to Yemen.
- g. Confronting terrorist organisations.
- h. Forming a committee under Saudi leadership and Coalition oversight to monitor implementation of the agreement and its annexes.
- i. STC participation in the government delegation to the negotiations to find a final political solution to the Houthi coup.
- j. As soon as the document is signed, President Hadi will issue directives to state bodies to implement the agreement.
- k. The first point is to be implemented in accordance with the provisions set out by Annexe 1, the second Annexe 2, and the third Annexe 3.

¹ "Text of the "Riyadh Agreement" Between Yemeni Government and STC "Document"", Anadolu Agency, 05/11/2019 (accessed on 08/11/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2CiQPnW>).



2) Annexe 1: Political and Economic Arrangements

These provisions govern the first point of the agreement. They include a national unity government of 24 ministers equally divided between north and south, to be formed within 30 days of signature; Hadi will name the premier and appoint its members from representatives not implicated in fighting or incitement during the events of August 2019. The Prime Minister will then appoint in consultation a governor and director of security for the Aden Governorate within 15 days, for Abyan and Dhalea within 30, and for the other southern provinces within 60.

The current premier will begin his work in Aden within less than a week of signature. He will work to get the institutions of the state functioning and manage its resources and income including oil, tax and customs revenues, deposit them in the central bank in Aden, dispense salaries and fees and provide parliament with a regular report on incomings and outgoings. He will also ensure the Central Agency for Auditing and Accounting begins carrying out its functions and restructure the National Anti-Corruption Commission and the Higher Economic Council.

3) Annexe 2: Military Arrangements

These provisions regulate the second point of the agreement. The forces that have advanced towards Aden, Abyan and Shabwa since the beginning of August 2019 will return to their original positions and their place will be taken by local security forces within fifteen days of signature. Within the same period the military and security forces stationed in the city of Aden will be disarmed and redeployed outside the city under the supervision of and according to timelines set by the coalition. All government and STC forces within the governorate of Aden will be redeployed to camps outside the governorate, to be set by the coalition command. The only exception to this is the First Presidential Protection Brigade, which will continue to protect the presidential palaces and their environs and guarantee the safe movement of the President. Similar protection will be afforded to STC leaders under coalition supervision.

The government and STC forces distributed across Aden are also to be unified, given new unit designations and placed under Defence Ministry control before being redeployed under coalition supervision, all within sixty days of signature. Forces in Abyan and Lahj will be reorganised under Defence Ministry control through the same procedure within the same period, with an additional thirty days for forces in the other southern provinces.

4) Annexe 3: Security Arrangements

These arrangements regulate Point 3 of the agreement. Police and support forces in the Governorate of Aden will take responsibility for their implementation and reorganisation of government and STC forces under the Governorate's Director of Security under the Interior Ministry, within 30 days

of signature. The same applies to the reorganisation of security and counterterrorism forces in Aden and their reinforcement with troops from government and STC forces, the appointment of new commanders and the assignment of new unit numbers under the Interior Ministry. Similar provisions, this time within 90 days, cover the Facility Defence Forces tasked with protecting vital civilian infrastructure in liberated provinces, including ports, the natural gas installation in Balhaf.

Secondly: Expected Challenges

The agreement and its full or partial implementation are expected to face challenges of various kinds:

1) Political challenges

The pressure imposed by the UAE appears clearly in limiting the participation of prominent members of the current government in the unity government provided for by the agreement⁽²⁾ because of their anti-Emirati positions.⁽³⁾ It is also notable that the agreement makes no reference to Hadi, his deputy General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar or other members of the government (other than the current premier) returning to the capital. This raises various questions about what exactly a unity government means if neither the president or the vice-president are able to return to the temporary capital.

The STC has also seized a major political victory solidifying the military defeat it inflicted on the government forces in the first round of confrontations in August 2019, securing control over three provinces (Aden, Lahj and Dhalea). The STC is now a full partner in the Hadi government and is recognised by the agreement and its sponsors as the strongest of the southern political entities. The agreement in this sense is a qualitative shift for the STC, whether it ultimately plans to secede or to lead the south as a fully autonomous region as part of a comprehensive political solution.

2) Challenges on the Ground

The agreement may serve as a means for the STC to consolidate its military and security control over some of the southern governorates. It does not explicitly determine the status of the forces spread out across the western coast, which remain outside Defence Ministry Control. It likewise does not determine the status of Socotra, where tensions are steadily escalating between the local government and elements loyal to the STC. This ambiguity may leave the door open to further clashes, especially

2 “Jeddah Agreement Delayed: Government Frustrates UAE Amendments And Security Arrangements Ongoing In Aden”, *Alaraby Aljadeed*, 20/10/2019 (accessed on 20/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2WOWECU>).

3 The agreement forbids all those who participated in acts of violence or incitement during the August 2019 confrontations from participating. This includes for example the Interior Minister Ahmad Al Massiri and the Transport Minister Salah Al Jabawani, who will be unable to take on portfolios in the new government. The same applies to the Governor of Shabwa Mohammed Saleh Bin Adyu, and military leaders like General Abdullah Al Subeihi and Colonel Mahran Al Qabati, both commanders in the Presidential Protection Brigades. Brigadiers Fadl Hassan and Fadl Baesh will be exempted because they did not participate in the fighting and are sympathetic to the STC: the first is in command of the Fourth Military Region and the second is in charge of the Special Forces in Aden and Abyan Governorates. On the STC's side, the commander of the Shabwa Elite Forces Major Muhammad Salem Al Bouher, the Vice-President of the STC's Leadership Committee Hani Bin Bureik and the head of the STC's National Assembly, Brigadier Ahmad Said Bin Bureik.

if the STC does not keep to its commitment to withdraw from government camps and buildings or to integrate its forces under the government's Defence and Interior Ministries.⁽⁴⁾ The government will not simply stand by and allow the STC to shirk its responsibilities under the agreement. This may lead to flare-ups, bearing in mind the existing conflict between the different poles of regional and party politics that have served as drivers of the violence that has periodically wracked the south.⁽⁵⁾

Moreover, the timeframe for the agreement seems impractical given the complications on the ground, the possibility that Al Qaeda may resume its activities and that the Houthis may attempt to directly target the agreement.⁽⁶⁾

Thirdly: Ramifications for Saudi-Emirati Relations

The agreement allows for a Saudi military presence in areas of UAE influence in the southern coastal cities in addition to its existing forces in Shabwa, Mahra and Hadhramawt. Saudi numbers began to increase after the August events under the pretext of ceasefire observation and preventing any further military escalation, and their units have been and still are steadily replacing their Emirati counterparts in military bases, Aden Airport and at the coalition headquarters. This will only increase with Saudi oversight of the agreement's implementation.⁽⁷⁾

This has meant a concurrent decrease in the role played by the UAE, particularly in Aden. Since the beginning of its military intervention in Yemen approximately five years ago, the UAE has worked hard to cultivate local representatives to protect its interests in the geostrategically important maritime region. This region controls international trading routes and the flow of oil, as well as being tied up in other Emirati regional interests, since it serves as an economic and commercial complement allowing it to extend its influence southwest of the Suez Canal around to the western Indian Ocean.⁽⁸⁾ It has now become obvious how unrealistic these conceptions are and how fragile this extension is. This may have ramifications for the Saudi-Emirati coalition, which has seen various new experiments recently both in Yemen and as regards Iran.

The divisions between the different Yemeni parties may also reflect Saudi-Emirati competition. While Hadi's government have stuck close by Saudi Arabia and openly condemned the UAE's policies in Yemen, the STC appear to be much closer to the Emirati position and much more willing to work under its umbrella.

4 "STC Takes Control Of Aden, Expands East: Ramifications And Scenarios", Situation Assessment, Al Jazeera Institute for Studies, 05/09/2019 (accessed on 21/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2JYGjX7>).

5 ACRPS, "Aden Conflict: Implications of the pro-Hadi Forces' Defeat in the Capital", Situation Assessment, 19 August 2019 (accessed on 27/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2NonMpp>).

6 Terrorist bombings, assassinations and targeting of energy transport have been well known tactics in Aden, Hadhramawt and Shabwa for four years in which tens of preachers, imams and others opposed to the Emirati presence have died. Various incidents were recorded before the agreement was signed including an IED attack targeting the house of the anti-Emirati Governor in Ataq (Shabwa Governorate).

7 Aziz Al Yaqoubi, "Saudi Takes Control Of Aden To End Yemen Allies Conflict," Reuters, 14/10/2019 (accessed on 27/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/36JK5xh>).

8 "STC Takes Control of Aden."



What is forgotten in all this is the major issue that began the war: the Houthis' control over Sanaa and swathes of Yemen. There are early indications that the Saudis may be engaging in dialogue with the Houthis, and it is not yet clear the extent to which it takes into account both parties' interests.

Conclusion

The Riyadh Agreement's success will depend in large part on the local parties' conviction that the agreement serves their purposes better at this moment in time than more fighting would. It will also require that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's interests in Yemen continue to coincide, which is far from guaranteed in the long term: Riyadh seems more concerned with the possibility of a Houthi state being established on its southern borders, while the UAE's efforts are focused entirely on its interests in the south, where it still has forces in Hadhramawt, parts of the Shabwa coastline and Socotra as well as maintaining strong links with the joint force on the western coast.