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Situation Assessment | 21 August 2019

Aden Conflict

Implications of the pro-Hadi Forces' Defeat in the Capital

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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Unit for Political Studies

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In the second week of August 2019 the city of Aden witnessed armed clashes between governmental forces loyal to the Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and the forces of the Southern Transitional Council (*al-Majlis al-Intiqali al-Janubi*) supported by the UAE. These clashes ended with the rout of the government forces and their expulsion from the city, which was declared the temporary capital of Yemen after Houthi militias took control of Sanaa in September 2014.

Causes and dimensions of the conflict

On 1 August 2019 the leader of the STC First Support Brigade (*Da'm wa-Isnad*), Munir Mahmoud al-Mashali (al-Yafi'i) – known as Abu'l-Yamama – was killed by a missile strike on a parade stage at Jala' Camp west of Aden. Despite the Houthis admitting responsibility for the attack,⁽¹⁾ this sparked armed confrontations between the Presidential Protection Brigades loyal to the legitimate government of president Hadi and the Council's Security Zone (*al-Hizam al-Amni*, also 'Security Belt') forces. The STC Vice President, Hani bin Bureik, implied during a press conference held on 6 August that Hadi's government were implicated in the attack, and – without citing any evidence – accused the Islah Party of responsibility as part of its plan to seize control of Aden. By the end of the press conference it was clear that the STC were intending to expel government forces from Aden.⁽²⁾

On 7 August the STC duly announced a general mobilization and marched on the presidential palace in Maashiq, the government's temporary headquarters.⁽³⁾ Maashiq occupies one side of a narrow peninsula in the Kreiter (Crater) area of Aden, protected by some six military units loyal to the government; the general mobilization thus accompanied a massing of tribal fighters from Lahj and Dalea provinces who had participated⁽⁴⁾ in al-Mashali's funeral procession.⁽⁴⁾

The relationship between the Hadi government and the now leadership of the STC was already poor before its creation was officially announced in May 2017. It has only worsened with the Council's attempts to impose itself as an alternative to Hadi's authority with Emirati support. This led to armed confrontations between the PPB and Aden Security Administration/Security Zone forces in January 2018 and again in January 2019.⁽⁵⁾

These moments in conflict between the STC and President Hadi mask an intense regional polarization between the Governorates of Abyan and Dalea rooted in historical grievances and worsened by the

1 "General Sari': Drone force carried out 60 attacks within last 3 months," *al-Mashhad al-Yemeni Net*, 02/08/2019 (accessed on 12/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2NgSaSQ>).

2 Bin Bureik did not accuse the Houthis, and stated that the missile had been launched from the northwest of Aden. The Houthis themselves gave no details about the rocket and did not film the incident as they normally do, which does leave several possibilities open as to the perpetrator. See: "Speech of STC Vice President Hani bin Bureik during press conference uncovering details of criminal targeting of Jala'," STC, 06/08/2019 (accessed on 12/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2YZHMG9>).

3 "STC announces general mobilisation of the people and southern forces," STC, 07/08/2019 (accessed on 12/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2zjn3hz>).

4 "Presidential Protection Brigades issue urgent statement on the latest developments in Aden," *Mogared Press*, 08/08/2019 (accessed on 11/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2KE8POC>).

5 UN Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen*, 26/07/2019 (accessed on 19/08/2019 at <https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2019/83>).



1994 Summer War when Abyan, Hadi's home province, supported the north in blocking an attempt at secession backed by Dalea. What is new here, however, is the UAE's use of these tensions for its own ends: to put an end to the influence of the Islah Party⁽⁶⁾ and the military and tribal forces that supported the Revolution of 11 February 2011, particularly Vice President Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. These aims cannot be accomplished without concurrently weakening the legitimacy of President Hadi.

The scene of the conflict

The confrontations between the Presidential Protection units and the Security Zone forces have been limited to specific areas of Aden: al-Tawahi, Kreiter, Khour Mikassar, Sheikh Othman, Dar Saad and to a more limited extent al-Bureiqa. The PPB were joined by the military police and groups from the Popular Resistance (*al-Muqawama ash-Sha'biyya*), while the STC was supported by Security Zone, counterterrorism and Aden security forces as well as tribal fighters who had come to participate in al-Yafi'i's funeral procession.

Two days after clashes broke out, STC forces succeeded in breaching the Fourth Presidential Protection Brigade's defences in Sheikh Othman (the northern entryway into Aden) and penetrating the urban interior along with tribal fighters. From there they were able to reinforce the First Infantry Brigade's positions in Jabal Hadid against its counterpart, the Third Presidential Protection Brigade,⁽⁷⁾ and gain control of Maashiq Palace without any resistance, with more than 200 soldiers allowed to evacuate safely on 10 August.⁽⁸⁾

Various factors helped to decide matters in the Security Zone's favour. In the 48 hour period covering 9 - 10 August, a number of army units announced that they were joining STC forces: the Fourth Military Area Command and the Military Police Command in the Lahj Governorate. Forces subordinate to the Interior Ministry also sided with the STC: the Lahj Governorate Police Administration and the Special Security Forces (*Quwwat al-Amn al-Khassa*, formerly Central Intelligence) of Aden, Lahj and Abyan Governorates.⁽⁹⁾ The Security Zone's timing of the battle to coincide with Eid al-Adha was also important: during the festival many soldiers are absent from their camps on holiday leave.⁽¹⁰⁾ STC forces also gained crucial battlefield experience during the expulsion of the Houthis from Aden in

6 Ibid, p. 13.

7 "Aden falls to STC, government cries coup," *Al Araby*, 10/08/2019 (accessed on 12/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2KIU1hP>).

8 "Saudi calls for an 'emergency meeting' of Aden conflict parties", *Al Hurra*, 10/08/2019 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://arbne.ws/2Mbpew1>).

9 For an example of these defections, see "Yemen: Special Forces commander announces defection from President Hadi's forces to the STC" (video), *RT*, 10/08/2019 (accessed on 12/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2KGUiQU>).

10 Generally rank and file soldiers and officers alike are entitled to yearly leave during Eid al-Adha and other major festivals. This appears to have affected the Presidential Protection Brigades' readiness, alongside the deliberate inflation of manpower for fraudulent ends, i.e. the number of soldiers present on the payroll exceeding the number actually present on the ground.

mid-2015 and subsequent battles on the western coast and in Lahj and Dalea. Several other factors also contributed to the defeat of the Presidential Protection Forces, including:⁽¹¹⁾

- Emirati military support to the Security Zone militias and other supporting forces.
- The government forces' adoption of a difficult defensive position which failed to take into consideration their concentration in areas difficult to reinforce by land (their strategic depth was the Gulf of Aden) and the impact this had on the defensive flexibility and effective performance necessary in the absence of advanced military materiel or fortifications.
- Endemic corruption in the administration and leadership of the government forces, including the Presidential Protection Forces.

The Arab Coalition's view of the conflict

The Coalition made no serious and rapid attempt to stop the conflict, limiting itself after four days of armed clashes to the announcement of a ceasefire and the return of both sides' forces to their *status quo* positions – by which point the STC forces had already won the battle. This was reinforced by a belated Saudi call for 'the sides between which conflict has broken out' to hold an emergency meeting in Riyadh,⁽¹²⁾ and airstrikes targeting unimportant targets.⁽¹³⁾

The UAE was likewise slow to take a political stance. After STC forces took control of Aden, the Emirati foreign minister called for a 'serious and responsible dialogue in order to end disagreements,'⁽¹⁴⁾ despite knowing that the matter has not been an issue of disagreements ever since the STC openly began making preparations to establish a state. This coincided with an intense media campaign, led by political figures and academics close to UAE leadership, seeking to promote separatism and defame President Hadi and calling for the expulsion of the government from Aden.

On the ground, Emirati personnel carriers helped STC forces to gain control of Aden,⁽¹⁵⁾ and the UAE also provided logistical support. It would have been illogical for Abu Dhabi to stand idle and expose an ally that has fought and is still fighting on its behalf to the risk of defeat,⁽¹⁶⁾ rendering moot its role in the formation of the STC and its support for its participation in the UN-backed peace process

11 The following were concluded from analysis of the distribution of both sides' forces, the clashes that took place and the types of military equipment involved, informed by military experience – as well as direct contact with parties involved in the fighting.

12 "Saudi calls for 'emergency meeting'".

13 Kareem Fahim & Ali Al-Mujahed, "Yemen: Seizure of Aden by Separatists Exposes Rift within Saudi Arabia and UAE Coalition," *The Washington Post*, 11/8/2019, accessed on 13/8/2019, at: <https://wapo.st/33rEsCp>

14 "UAE expresses great concern regarding armed clashes in Aden," *Emirates News Agency*, 10/08/2019 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2OLa9mO>).

15 The Yemeni Interior Minister, Ahmad Al Missri, has stated openly that four hundred Emirati APCs participated and were deployed throughout Aden. "The figure may be exaggerated, but does show that a large number of them took part." See: "Yemeni Interior Minister before leaving Aden: 400 Emirati APCs took part in the battle against us," Youtube, 11/08/2019 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2H3ETJt>).

16 Stephen W. Day, "The Future Structure of the Yemeni State," Middle East Institute, 14/8/2019 (accessed on 15/8/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/31lr37a>).



as a major southern force.⁽¹⁷⁾ The UAE had also previously helped to strengthen STC forces' position by launching air strikes on Presidential Protection forces during the clashes that took place in early 2018.

Developments since the STC took control of Aden

With al-Yafi'i dead⁽¹⁸⁾ and the STC in control of Aden, the UAE is looking to create a military-political alliance between the STC – now a force capable of bringing about serious change on the ground – and the General People's Congress Party (*Hizb al-Mu'tamar ash-Sha'bi al-'Amm*, specifically the wing led by Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is resident in the UAE). The latter's forces, led by Ali Abdullah's cousin, General Tariq Muhammad Abdullah Saleh control, to a limited extent and with Emirati support, the western coast region, and their influence is growing. By brokering this alliance, the UAE may hope to gain control over the areas currently subject to Hadi's government in the Ta'iz Governorate in coordination with the battalions of the Salafi Leader General Adil Abdo Fari' (Abu'l-'Abbas) stationed in Al Kadha, which also enjoy Emirati support.⁽¹⁹⁾

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, is attempting to reconcile its alliance with the UAE with its commitments to the Yemeni government, and as such is calling for the STC to withdraw from the camps and government buildings that it has taken over. At the same time, it is continuing the redeployment of its troops throughout Al Arish and Salaheddin to the east and west of Aden respectively that began in late July 2019, working to build medium-sized military bases ready for future development.⁽²⁰⁾ There has been a marked increase in the number of troops on the ground here since Aden fell to the STC, although the Saudi forces already present in Aden by the time clashes began remained entirely neutral. The calls for dialogue and appeals to the STC to withdraw are in practice no more than necessary lip service paid to the government. The STC knows that who is in control on the ground will be the ultimate deciding factor.

Conclusion

The hopes of the legitimate government in Aden currently lie with a return to the status quo as of 7 August 2019. The price of this, however, will be power-sharing with the STC, which means a

¹⁷ The STC President, Eidrous al-Zubeidi, last met UN Special Envoy Martin Griffith on 6 August 2019 in Abu Dhabi. See: "President Al Zubeidi meets UN Special Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffith," STC, 06/08/2019 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2KIDKJK>).

¹⁸ Al-Yafi'i's orientation did not conform with the new Emirati policy direction, particularly as regards alliances with any northern forces. He took a clear and open position particularly against the tribe of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and other northern forces. See: "Commander Abu'l-Yamama al-Yafi'i threatens General Tariq Affash and President Hadi with a 'war of annihilation,'" *Youtube*, 15/07/2018 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/2KIDKJK>).

¹⁹ Less than a week after Security Zone forces took control of Aden, Tariq Muhammad Abdallah Saleh's forces seized Al-Omri camp in the Dhubab region, which had been the headquarters of one division of the Presidential Protection Brigades defeated in Aden. Saleh then set about acting as military governor in Bab al-Mandib, Mokha and Khoukha, meeting with local notables and issuing orders. See: "General Tariq Saleh affirms importance of strengthening local authorities in liberated districts," *Khabar*, 14/08/2019 (accessed on 15/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/31MPCzR>).

²⁰ "Exclusive: Details of Saudi military equipment and materiel arriving in Aden," *Adin al-Ghad*, 24/07/2019 (accessed on 13/08/2019 at <https://bit.ly/33KkbrW>).



gradual move towards secession or the “reestablishment of the independent southern federal state,” according to an STC declaration issued five days after they took control of the city.⁽²¹⁾ This gives particular relevance to their insistence that their candidates be appointed to the Defense or Interior Ministries, guaranteeing that they will be able to hold on to, further develop and directly manage their existing military forces, as well as giving them access to governorates currently well outside their control; these forces will serve as a tool to realize their political ambitions later. But there are still obstacles to these ambitions, not least the existence of contrary aims and programs in the various governorates. Opening the Pandora’s Box of fragmentation does not mean being able to close it whenever and however necessary.

21 See: “STC issue urgent political declaration,” STC, 15/08/2019 (accessed on 16/08/2019 at <https://stcaden.com/news/10116>).