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South Yemen Escalation: Is the Country Headed for an Emirati- Sponsored Partition?

Unit for Political Studies

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After a period of relative calm that had prevailed since the formation of the Presidential Leadership Council in 2022, a major military operation seized swathes of southern Yemen last week, particularly in the governorates of Hadramout and al-Mahra. Military factions, most notably the Emirati-backed Hadrami Elite Forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), took control of key cities under the administration of the internationally recognized government in Wadi Hadramout, such as Seiyun and Mukalla, in addition to oil facilities in al-Masila and al-Hadaba, following the withdrawal of Saudi-backed forces from these oil-rich areas. In al-Mahra, government facilities (such as the presidential palace and the Port of Nashtoon) were handed over to STC forces without resistance. The STC's control was also extended to Shabwa, meaning that all southern and eastern ports and coastlines now fall under its influence, from Mokha to Nashtoon. Although the STC sought to portray the objective of these moves as "purely military and security-related",¹ aimed at rectifying problems "in this strategic area", which it claimed had become "a major corridor for arms smuggling to the Houthis" and al-Qaeda,² the President of the Southern Transitional Council, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, openly revealed secessionist intent, referring to efforts to build the "institutions of the emerging Arab South state". The internationally recognized Yemeni government, most of whose members have left the interim capital Aden for Riyadh,³ described the events as "a coup against constitutional legitimacy", warning that they undermine the state and threaten the country's unity.⁴

Background to the Conflict between the STC and the Government

This is not the first time that the STC, established in 2017 with Emirati military and financial backing and seeking the secession of the southern governorates from Yemen, has attempted to advance militarily and politically in pursuit of separation. In this instance, however, it is exploiting the political legitimacy it acquired through the inclusion of its representatives in the Presidential Leadership Council, without relinquishing its secessionist agenda.

In August 2019, armed clashes between government forces loyal to former Yemeni president Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and forces of the STC took place in Aden. These clashes resulted in the expulsion of government forces from Aden, which had been declared the interim capital following the takeover of Sana'a by the Houthis in September 2014. On 1 August 2019, the killing of Brigadier General Munir Mahmoud Ahmad al-Mashali (Abu Yamamah al-Yafai), commander of the First Brigade affiliated with the STC, triggered armed confrontations between the Presidential Protection Brigades loyal to the government and the Security Belt Forces, the military arm of the STC. This was despite the

¹ "Statement by the Southern Transitional Council regarding the security, military, and political developments in Wadi Hadramout", *Al-Raydah Now News*, Facebook, 3/12/2025, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPNH>

² Saddam Al-Kamali, "Yemeni Presidential Council to Hold Meeting Amid Uncertainty and Escalating Separatist Rhetoric", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 10/12/2025 accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPKW>

³ Mohammed Abdo, "How did the 'Southern Transitional Council's' control of Hadramout and Al-Mahra force the Yemeni government to leave Aden?", *Al Jazeera*, 8/12/2025, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPop>

⁴ "Al-Alimi accuses the Southern Transitional Council of undermining the legitimacy of the Yemeni government", *Al Jazeera*, 8/12/2025, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPF6>

Houthis acknowledging responsibility for the attack that killed Brigadier al-Yafai, which targeted a parade platform at al-Jalaa military camp, west of Aden, and claimed the lives of eighteen people.⁵

Nevertheless, the STC's vice-president, Hani bin Brik, at the time hinted at the involvement of President Hadi's government in the attack and explicitly accused the al-Islah Party of responsibility, describing it as part of a plan to seize control of Aden – an accusation that paved the way for a move aimed at expelling the government from the city.⁶ Indeed, on 7 August 2019, the STC called for public mobilization and an advance towards the Ma'ashiq presidential palace, which the government had adopted as its temporary headquarters. While the STC used the incident as a pretext to expand its control in the south and weaken President Hadi's authority, the UAE exploited it to achieve its own objectives, notably the elimination of Islah influence and disempowering the military and tribal forces that had supported the 2011 uprising. Emirati infantry vehicles participated alongside STC forces in taking control of Aden at the time.

Saudi Arabia sought during that period to balance the preservation of its alliance with the UAE against the Houthis in the north with its commitments to the recognized government. It therefore moved to mediate an end to the crisis and to restore the situation to what it had been prior to the August 2019 events, culminating in the Riyadh Agreement in November 2019.⁷ The agreement stipulated the return of both sides' forces to their previous positions, the handover of key sites – such as Aden airport and the presidential palace – to Saudi forces, and the formation of a new government in which the STC would hold half the ministerial portfolios.⁸ Tensions nonetheless persisted as the STC continued to seize every opportunity that brought it closer to secession.

In April 2022, President Hadi was compelled to relinquish power and to form a Presidential Leadership Council, to which his own powers and those of his vice-president, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, were transferred. Hadi's authority had been steadily eroding in the face of the Houthis in the north and the STC, whose influence was growing in the interim capital Aden and in several southern governorates. The emergence of the "Giants Brigades" on the western coast, before their redeployment eastwards to the governorates of Shabwa and Marib, and of the forces led by Brigadier Tareq Mohammed Saleh, the nephew of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, on the western coast and in Bab al-Mandab, all of which enjoy Emirati backing, also contributed to shaping a new political and military landscape in Yemen.

The formation of the Presidential Leadership Council reflected these balances of power on the ground, with the south represented by four members, while seven of the Council's eight members came from military or security backgrounds. Three of them command military formations extending

⁵ "Yemen: Dozens killed in Houthi attack on Aden military parade", *Al-Jazeera*, 1/8/2019, accessed on 14/12/2025 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPcB>

⁶ "Aden Conflict: Implications of the pro-Hadi Forces' Defeat in the Capital," Situation Assessment, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 19/8/2019, accessed 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP4z>

⁷ "The Riyadh Agreement on Yemen: Arrangements and Chances of Success", Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 7/11/2019, accessed on 14/12/2025 at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP2b>

⁸ "The New Yemeni Government: Formation, Prospects and Challenges," P Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 4/1/2021, accessed 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPqu>



from the western coast to the southern governorates; they differ politically, and they do not declare loyalty to the recognized government despite their shared hostility towards the Houthis.⁹

Current Escalation

The STC offensive launched on 2 December 2025 dubbed "Operation Promising Future" cannot be separated from the recent tensions in Saudi Emirati relations over several regional issues, most notably Sudan, where Abu Dhabi supports the Rapid Support Forces while Riyadh backs the Sudanese army. The offensive marked a radical shift in the country's political map, with significant regional repercussions. By 9 December, STC leaders announced that their forces had completed their takeover of al-Mahra Governorate, bordering Oman, and Hadramout Governorate, which shares extensive borders with Saudi Arabia. As a result, the STC has come to dominate most of the southern governorates, controlling around 80 per cent of Yemen's oil reserves and the majority of the populated areas in the south.¹⁰

Hadramout and al-Mahra are considered areas of Saudi influence, where tribal and military forces close to Riyadh operate and rely on Saudi support. The STC's expansion into these governorates therefore constitutes a direct challenge to Saudi influence. Moreover, both governorates are of strategic importance to Saudi Arabia, as they form part of its future plans to establish oil transport pipelines leading to the Arabian Sea, thereby avoiding the vulnerable Strait of Hormuz. Saudi Arabia is also considering leveraging the strategic location of these two Yemeni border governorates to develop ports that would provide important alternatives for trade routes with direct access to the Indian Ocean.¹¹

Saudi Arabia has called for the complete withdrawal of STC-affiliated forces from the sites they seized, and for the local, Saudi-backed National Shield Forces affiliated with the Riyadh-based Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council to take over the military camps and assume responsibility for security tasks there, rejecting any attempts to impose a fait accompli.¹² However, doubts have arisen regarding the STC's willingness to respond to Saudi calls, as well as about Riyadh's current ability to contain the situation as it has in the past given the growing rifts in its relationship with Abu Dhabi. This is reflected in the failure of the official Saudi delegation dispatched to Hadramout to meet political and tribal leaders to reopen a dialogue aimed at limiting military escalation. The STC ignored the agreement reached on 3 December and pressed ahead with its takeover of the eastern governorates of southern Yemen.¹³

⁹ "at ,2025/12/ accessed 14 ,2022/1/18 ,2021/1/Transfer of Power in Yemen to a Presidential Council: Political Context and Implications," ACRPS, 4 " 9 <https://acr.ps/1L9BPM>

¹⁰ Rayhan Uddin, "Yemen's UAE-backed STC Seizes Control of City in Hadramaut Offensive," *Middle East eye*, 3/12/2025, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BP5a>

¹¹ "Saudi Arabia 'to Build Oil Port' in Yemen's al-Mahra: Sources," *Aljazeera*, 20/8/2018, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPs2>

¹² "Secretary Rubio's Call with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud," U.S. Department of State, 9/12/2025, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPnJ>

¹³ Riyam Mohammed Makhshaf, "Saudi-sponsored agreement to de-escalate military conflict in Hadramout, Yemen," *Reuters*, 3/12/2025, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BOUZ>

In reality, the Presidential Leadership Council formed in 2022, of which the STC secured half the seats, reflected the consensus between Saudi Arabia and the UAE at that time, together with their allied political and military forces, to share power and influence in the governorates outside Houthi control. Today, however, amid Saudi Emirati disputes, it was to be expected that the Council would be shaken by developments such as those witnessed in the south. This implies that the Council, which sought to cling to the legitimacy inherited, albeit weakly, from President Hadi's government, will see that legitimacy further eroded. Yemen may therefore indeed be heading towards partition, with the establishment of an Emirati-backed state in the south.¹⁴ This state has the potential to emerge as an ally of Israel, at a time when Israel itself is seeking to divide Yemen, which, during Israel's genocidal war against Gaza, became one of the most active fronts opposing Israel.

Conclusion

The STC's seizure of most of southern Yemen, including areas of strategic importance such as Perim Island in the Bab al-Mandab Strait and the Indian ocean island of Socotra, signals a major shift in a conflict that has been ongoing since the Houthis took control of Sana'a in 2014.¹⁵ Although competition for influence in the south has existed for years, the developments since 2 December 2025 amount to a de facto termination of the Yemeni government's presence in the southern and eastern governorates. They also represent an attempt to prise these governorates, and their party and political forces, away from government control. The government now effectively lacks meaningful influence on the ground, amid the rising power of the STC in the south and the growing influence of the Houthis in the north.

Backed by Saudi Arabia, the recognized Yemeni government aspires to restore the situation in Hadramout, al-Mahra, and the rest of the southern governorates to the pre- 2 December status quo. At the same time, however, Saudi Arabia, dissatisfied with recent developments, is seeking to avoid a direct military confrontation with Emirati-backed forces. If the STC continues to impose faits accomplis after each crisis, this would signify a gradual move towards secession, or what the STC considers the restoration of an independent federal southern state. Significant obstacles remain, however, including the Houthis' rejection of any form of secession, which heightens the likelihood of a slide into protracted chaos that could return Yemen to a cycle of open-ended conflict that no party is able to resolve militarily. Added to this are the ambitions of other local actors in various southern governorates. As a result, secession in the south could open the door to further fragmentation and divisions.

¹⁴ "UAE-Backed Forces Expand Control in Southern Yemen," The Soufan Center, 8/12/2025, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPKP>

¹⁵ Ahmed Al-Haj & Samy Magdy, "UAE-backed Separatists Tighten Grip over Southern Yemen, and Airspace is Briefly Closed," *The Washington Post*, 8/12/2025, accessed on 14/12/2025, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9BPJm>