



## The Role of Hirak and the Southern Transitional Council

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During Yemen's street protests of 2011, and later during the years of war between 2015 and 2019, developments in the south were largely distinct from events in the north. To begin with, the demands of southern protesters in 2011 were unlike demands in the north because at the time southerners had been holding continuous street protests since 2007, four years before the northern opposition imported the "Arab Spring" model from Tunis and Cairo. Between 2007 and 2011, mass street protests in the south were part of a popular movement called *al-Hirak*, "the Movement," which drew hundreds of thousands of citizens to the streets.

Hirak derived its early momentum from grievances unique to the south following the outcome of a civil war in 1994, four years after the former governments of north and south Yemen united in May 1990. The difference between northern and southern protests in 2011 clearly manifested itself because, after President Saleh resigned in November, the majority of southern citizens adopted the old southern flag of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). By flying the southern flag over their homes and businesses, they expressed overt desires to restore independence from the north.

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When warfare erupted in early 2015, combat on southern lands increasingly played out as a war within the war, separate from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) coalition operations in the north against Houthi rebels and remnant loyalists of Saleh. In early March 2015, a few weeks before the start of the GCC-led Operation Decisive Storm, armed forces associated with the Houthi-Saleh alliance invaded southern lands. Soldiers of the Houthi-Saleh alliance immediately faced fierce armed resistance from southerners who backed the goals of Hirak.

Hirak first appeared in 2007 as a peaceful protest movement against Saleh's government in the capital Sanaa. It was led by former southern military officers, after evolving from an earlier set of peaceful sit-ins organized by the same officers who were forced into early retirement during the latter years of the previous decade. The involvement of military officers in Hirak is significant because citizens of the south identified the men with patriotic commitments to the former southern government which ruled prior to 1990 from its capital in Aden. Some of these men began training guerrilla forces in preparation for future conflict. When the moment arrived in March 2015, the "Southern Movement" transformed overnight into the "Southern Resistance," *al-Muqawama al-Junubiyya*.

By late summer 2015, once Aden was "liberated" with assistance of the GCC coalition, primarily UAE military forces, political events followed separate courses in the north and south. The most significant wartime difference between the north and south happened when the Southern Transitional Council (STC) was announced in Aden on May 11, 2017 (Forster 2017). Slightly more than two years later, the STC came to power in Aden after routing forces loyal to President Hadi during street battles in August 2019. This represented the sharpest divide inside the GCC coalition since the start of war. At the end of August, Hadi loyalists, particularly armed forces in Mareb and Shabwa provinces under the command of Vice President General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, were on the verge of retaliating against STC forces inside the former southern capital, but the UAE air force bombed their positions, killing and injuring some 300 men (Walsh and al-Batati 2019).

The STC was founded by a section of Hirak's leadership from al-Dali province, located roughly 100 kilometers north of Aden. Head of the STC is Aidroos al-Zubaydi, a former governor of Aden who originates from al-Dali. One of his closest associates, Shallal Ali Shai, who took command of a large security force in Aden at the end of 2015, is the son of a former PDRY minister of interior from al-Dali. During the early phase of the war in 2015, Aidroos al-Zubaydi and Shallal Ali Shai commanded "Southern

Resistance” forces in their native al-Dali before joining the fight to liberate Aden during the summer. Their efforts at the time ostensibly served the cause of President Hadi who also originates from the south. But later phases of the southern war within the war primarily reflected a division between President Hadi on the one hand, and members of the STC who rejected Hadi’s authority on the other hand.

Under al-Zubaydi’s leadership the STC advocated political and economic programs based upon self-rule of southern territory which STC leaders redefined as “South Arabia” to distinguish it from Yemen in the north. Al-Zubaydi established a shadow cabinet with ministry-level appointments (al-Arabi al-Jadeed 2017). On foreign affairs, the STC promised to support Western counter-terrorism policy, while pursuing stronger ties with the GCC, particularly the UAE. When the UAE and Saudi Arabia blockaded Qatar in 2017, the STC eagerly showed support. This was because, in part, the blockade targeted Qatar’s alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood’s network of political organizations.

The STC considered Yemen’s Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islah party to be its primary enemy. This created tensions within the GCC coalition because President Hadi relied upon Islah leaders in the north to fight Houthi forces. On many occasions, STC forces clashed with Hadi’s presidential guards in Aden, causing Saudi officials to intervene with the UAE in defense of Hadi. It is too simplistic to view events in the south as a revival of Yemen’s north-south territorial division because multiple divisions exist on each side of the former border. President Hadi still found considerable support from factions in the south, especially in northern Shabwa and Abyan provinces, and there are small factions in Hadramaut’s inland canyon that continued supporting Hadi and in some cases, former President Saleh (Salisbury 2018). As a result, the STC is unlikely to take control of all southern territory.

GCC coalition partners operated separate spheres of influence in southern provinces depending upon local support or opposition to President Hadi. Hadi’s supporters were generally closer to Saudi Arabia, while his opponents tended to align themselves with the UAE. This dramatically constrained the ability of the STC to function as a governing body, as long as the GCC coalition directed the war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia’s military commanders operated within inland regions of Shabwa, Hadramaut, and al-Mahra provinces in the east, while UAE commanders operated along the coasts of the same provinces and in western provinces around Aden. When the UAE sent military forces to Yemen’s large island of Soqatra on the edge of the Indian Ocean in May 2018, President Hadi’s government

objected in strong terms. Once again the Saudi king intervened with his Emirati allies to avoid conflict.

The southern war within the war added complexity to political dynamics in Yemen not only because it created tensions between GCC coalition partners, but because it opened the door to greater outside interference beyond the GCC, namely from Iran. The enduring cause of political turmoil on the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula is the fact that the land's highly strategic location invites foreign meddling, and domestic rivals are skillfully adept at using foreign assistance to engage their own internal power struggles. STC leaders understood the internal political dynamics of the GCC, as well as the tenuous nature of Saudi Arabia's commitment to support the legitimacy of President Hadi, so they attempted to play a "long game."

### BACKGROUND, 1994–2010

The roots of Hiraq and the Southern Transitional Council trace back to the end of the 1994 civil war, when President Saleh's northern army defeated the remnant southern army commanded by Vice President Ali Salem al-Bid, leader of the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP). Al-Bid and thousands of others fled the country in July 1994, settling primarily in neighboring states, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the UAE. The Saudi government sympathized with southern exiles who found refuge there. Earlier in the war, Riyadh sent a shipment of arms to Aden, intending to assist al-Bid's goal of southern secession. But Saleh proved stronger than Saudi officials anticipated.

One southern exiled leader who lived in Saudi Arabia was Abdulrahman al-Jifri, head of Yemen's oldest political party, al-Rabita, the League of the Sons of South Arabia, which was based in Aden. During the 1994 war, al-Jifri joined al-Bid's secessionist government, and he later formed a national opposition front abroad called MOWJ, which Aidroos al-Zubaydi and others joined. At the time of the 1994 war, al-Zubaydi was an officer in the southern air force. Like al-Bid, he sought refuge in Muscat, Oman. Unlike al-Bid who remained in Muscat after being granted Omani citizenship, al-Zubaydi stayed only six months (Mused 2019).

When al-Zubaydi returned to al-Dali, his secret purpose was to begin training a resistance group called *Harakat Tabrir al-Masrir*, "The Self-Determination Front," which served MOWJ's strategy to restore the independence of South Arabia (Mused 2019). He operated underground during the middle and late 1990s, moving between southern provinces to

train youth in methods of resisting Saleh's rule. During this time period, it was evident that al-Dali was the center of southern armed resistance because major artillery battles erupted in and around the city during 1998, when Saleh made al-Dali the capital of a new province intended to erase part of the old north-south border (Day 2012, p. 184). In essence, al-Zubaydi and other former officers prepared the ground for Hiraq's rise in 2007. They supported Hiraq's tactics of peaceful protest because they knew conditions were not ripe to sustain an armed rebellion. Saleh's brutal military repression of Houthis rebels during the northern war in Saada province, 2004–2009, convinced them it was futile to resort to arms.

There was another reason why al-Zubaydi and other southern military officers postponed their armed rebellion during the decade of the 2000s. They realized that they needed to build greater solidarity on the ground by overcoming divisions caused by past political conflicts in the south. The main political conflicts occurred in three periods with each one creating a large exiled population: first, after 1968, when a coup empowered a Marxist faction in Aden that allied with the Soviet Union, while seizing properties of ruling class families; second, deadly violence beginning on January 13, 1986, when an intra-regime clash between factions of the YSP led to thousands of deaths; and third, the 1994 war.

The politics of Hiraq and the STC can be understood in terms of relations between the exiled groups of 1968, 1986, and 1994. In large part, this is because former president Saleh manipulated their members against each other as part of his infamous "divide and rule" tactics. During the early 1990s, Saleh used radical anti-YSP members of the pre-1968 group to create violence against those who fled into exile in 1994. Afterward, he allied with members of the 1986 group, while denying the political claims of southern ruling class families from the pre-1968 era. By the late 1990s, all southerners were aware that Saleh played a "divide and rule" game against them, yet they did not yet understand the game's rules.

Southern abilities to counter Saleh's political gamesmanship changed after the "Public Forum for the Sons of the Southern and Eastern Provinces" met in Sanaa during the month of Ramadan in the winter of 2001–2002 (Day 2012, pp. 191–194). The Public Forum included people with ties to all three exiled groups, yet its key members were individuals from the 1968 and 1986 groups who served in government after the 1994 war. They drafted a list of southern grievances to send President Saleh, requesting his response in a personal letter. As an informal political lobby, the Public Forum failed. But its failure persuaded more southerners to build group solidarity.

The direct precursor of Hiraq was a gathering called “reconciliation and forgiveness” held in al-Dali on January 13, 2007 (Day 2012, p. 228). Its purpose was to heal the wounds caused by the violent intra-regime clash of January 1986. Over the next two months, a group of retired military officers began holding sit-ins at a cemetery in Aden for martyrs of the 1986 fighting. By the middle of May 2007, they formed a local coordinating council. One day before the anniversary of Yemeni unity on May 22, a leader of the coordinating council named Nasir Ali al-Nuba called for sit-ins across the south. This marked the formal start of Hiraq (Day 2012, pp. 228–229).

Al-Nuba was assisted by other officers like Ali al-Sadi, Muhammad Saleh Tameh, and Dr. Abdulh al-Mattar. People from other professions contributed, such as a civic leader in Aden named Muhammad Hasan who led the local Radfani society; Hasan Ba Awm, longtime leader of the YSP in al-Mukalla, Hadramaut; retired Ambassador Qassem Askar; a lawyer named Yahya Ghaleb; an engineer named Abdullah Hasan; and a professor named Saleh Yahya al-Said. Many others played significant roles, including Amin Saleh Muhammad, Saleh Said al-Shanfara, and Dr. Nasser al-Khobaji (Mused 2019). The challenge for Hiraq was never a shortage of leadership. Instead, a large pool of leaders made it difficult to unite the movement.

Hasan Ba Awm formed the first umbrella organization, called the National Council for Southern Hiraq. President Saleh arrested him, al-Nuba, and others. Following Ba Awm’s release from jail, he broke from the National Council in early 2008, and his deputy Amin Saleh Muhammad assumed its leadership. Afterward Ba Awm and others including al-Shanfara created an organization called the Council of the Southern Revolutionary Movement. This organization later split as well. By 2009, there were seven different organizations holding street protests under the name Hiraq (Stracke and Heydar 2010). As a decentralized source of mass opposition, the movement required the work of many individuals who acted as mediators to maintain political momentum. The same challenge existed for the STC during and after 2017.

The main energy driving Hiraq’s street protests in 2007 and subsequent years came from the youth wings of the different organizations. Youth bore the brunt of repression by Saleh’s regime. Between 2007 and 2010, more than 100 young Hiraq protesters were killed, while thousands more were jailed and injured. Saleh tried yet failed to justify his acts of repression by accusing Hiraq leaders of affiliation with al-Qaeda. This was a tactic Saleh used in 2006 against an opposition presidential candidate

named Faisal Bin Shamlan, the highly respected former southern minister of oil (Day 2012, pp. 221–222).

Hirak leaders always held rallies on anniversary dates of southern rebellion against British colonial rule in the 1960s. This helped cast Saleh's agents of repression as members of a foreign occupation. On the eve of the main October 14 holiday in 2007, four young Hirak activists were killed at the same location in the mountains of al-Radfan where southern martyrs were shot by British police forces. Their funeral drew hundreds of thousands of citizens to the rural region (Day 2012, pp. 229–232). By using lethal force, Saleh radicalized the protest movement as the line between civil and uncivil forms of resistance blurred. By the **spring of 2008, Saleh used tanks, artillery, and fighter aircraft in response to Hirak activists who took up guns in Lahej and al-Dali provinces.**

In April 2009, Sheikh Tareq al-Fadli, son of the former ruler of al-Fadli region and a member of the Arab mujahideen who joined Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan during the 1980s, declared his support for Hirak. Saleh's security forces later clashed with the sheikh's guards at his home in Zinjibar, capital of Abyan province. The hours-long battle resumed two months later in September 2009 after which the sheikh lived under house arrest (Day 2012, pp. 247–251). Although Sheikh al-Fadli renounced any relationship with al-Qaeda, his declaration of support for Hirak signaled a more militant phase that would make it difficult to distinguish between acts of resistance and terrorism. In July 2010, an AQAP cell launched a brazen attack on Zinjibar's police headquarters and banks. The next month Saleh's army was ambushed in Lawdar, Abyan, where ten soldiers were killed by militants using RPG missiles (Day 2012, pp. 270–272). The army ordered 80,000 residents to evacuate before launching a house-to-house search.

### STREET PROTESTS AND POLITICAL TRANSITION, 2011–2014

The “Arab Spring” of 2011 altered the context of Hirak in two ways. First, the northern street protests in Sanaa and Taiz dwarfed the size of Hirak protests in the south, giving initiative to opposition leaders in the north. Second, as leaders of northern protests called for an end to Saleh's rule, they assumed Hirak leaders shared the same agenda, presumably making it possible to respond to southern grievances. But the vast majority of Hirak leaders viewed the agenda of the “Arab Spring” as part of northern politics, not southern politics. They viewed Saleh's removal from

power as an inadequate response to their grievances because they no longer accepted a national union identified with Yemen. Instead, they sought a total break in relations with the north through a process called *fak al-irtibat*, “disengagement.”

Use of the term “disengagement” suggested the process should happen by political means, in contrast to the attempted secession by military means in 1994. After 2011, Hiraq leaders demanded a referendum under international supervision to determine whether or not southern citizens wanted to remain united with the north. They argued that disengagement was the will of the people, so the population should vote on the matter before politicians in Sanaa devised a process for moving forward, as later happened during the UN-supervised National Dialogue Conference in 2013–2014.

One of the ways the “Arab Spring” altered the wider context of southern politics was that exiled southern leaders began to participate in discussions about Yemen’s future. This included old YSP antagonists like Ali Nasser Muhammad who served as president of the PDRY between 1980 and 1986, and Ali Salem al-Bid who governed the south after the January 13, 1986, clashes. Hiraq leaders encouraged the two men to join the movement’s “reconciliation and forgiveness” process by meeting to bury their animosities. On January 2, 2013, the two former southern leaders held a friendly meeting in Beirut, Lebanon, where they urged the southern people to unite and demand international recognition of their right to self-determination.

Ali Salem al-Bid lived 13 years with Omani citizenship, after agreeing to requests by government officials in Muscat that he end his political involvement and never speak publicly about events in Yemen. Al-Bid broke his political silence at the end of Hiraq’s second year of protests in May 2009. He subsequently moved to Beirut, Lebanon, where he founded a pro-Hiraq satellite channel that broadcast news from a district controlled by Iranian-backed Hizbullah leaders. During this time, some commanders of Hiraq factions loyal to al-Bid reportedly received military training from Hizbullah officers in Lebanon. Ali Nasser Muhammad lived nearby in Damascus, Syria. Since the 1980s, he maintained good relations with the al-Assad family and its ruling Arab Socialist Baath party.

Unlike al-Bid who never returned to Yemen, Muhammad made a brief visit at the invitation of President Saleh in 1996. He did not remain because he opposed Saleh’s “divide and rule” tactics of pitting 1986 exiles against others. After 2011, both Muhammad and al-Bid promoted disengagement from north Yemen. They compared southern demands for disengagement to the 1961 break between Syria and Egypt after their failed



political union in 1958. Other exiled southern leaders, including al-Jifri and former president and prime minister Haidar al-Attas, joined the growing calls for disengagement. Joint activities by southern exiles often occurred in Cairo, Egypt, following Hosni Mubarak's overthrow in 2011. The UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Jamal Bin Omar, met them to understand their views of Yemen's future.

After Hadi became transitional president of Yemen in early 2012, government policy in Sanaa followed the script of the GCC Initiative requiring engagement through national dialogue, rather than disengagement. There were rumors that Hadi might meet exiled leaders calling for southern independence. But as head of state for all citizens of Yemen, the president could not associate with politicians advocating redivision along north-south lines. Holding firmly to their position on disengagement, HIRAK leaders inside and outside the country announced a formal boycott of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) organized under Hadi's leadership with UN supervision. As a result, they were highly critical of Hadi's interim role. Much like their former view of Saleh, HIRAK leaders considered Hadi a corrupt politician who was solely interested in empowering his own family members, especially one son who controlled military forces like Saleh's son once did.

During the transition between 2012 and 2014, HIRAK leaders concentrated on building street-level popular committees across the south (Mused 2019). Once again, there was no central leadership behind the effort, yet the committees generally united around a common demand for disengagement from the north. Thousands of weekly meetings were held to discuss the latest news and information. Most committees integrated religious principles into their meetings, and Islamic scholars who attended often discussed the goals of HIRAK in terms of Islamic law (Dahlgren 2018). At the same time, many Salafis joined the military training offered by former officers in Lahej, al-Dali, Abyan, Shabwa, and Hadramaut provinces. Training took place in isolated cells to protect the names and identities of those involved in planned guerrilla operations. When warfare erupted in March 2015, the alliance between HIRAK and sympathetic Salafis proved a decisive factor in the outcome of many battles.

Prior to the NDC's opening in March 2013, there was a long delay due to disagreements over the process of selecting delegates to Sanaa. In keeping with Yemen's tradition of resolving conflict through "big tent" negotiations, NDC organizers wanted all parties and factions to be represented, including Houthi rebels in the north and HIRAK protesters in the south.

Hirak's boycott was one of the main reasons for the long delay. President Hadi tasked a southern member of his staff, Ahmed Bin Mubarak, to recruit southern delegates to participate in Hirak's name. A senior southern politician named Yaseen Makawi eventually led the "Hirak" delegation, although he played no role in the southern protest movement. Makawi was assisted by several other southerners who were sympathetic to Hirak's goals. A close associate of exiled leader Ali Nasser Muhammad, named Muhammad Ahmed Ali who served as governor of Abyan province until the middle 1980s, joined the "Hirak" delegation.

"Hirak" delegates played two main roles at the NDC. First, as part of a working group called the "Southern Issue," they prepared a lengthy report documenting crimes and abuses suffered by southern citizens after the 1994 war, including murder, assault, harassment, discrimination, land theft, and business corruption. The report was issued in digital form during the summer of 2013. It offered the best summary of grievances in southern provinces, and its findings were generally approved by all members, including street leaders who boycotted the NDC. Second, as part of another working group called "State Structure," they argued in favor of drafting a new constitution based on a federal division of power between two regions: one in the north, and one in the south, corresponding to the pre-1990 north-south division. On this matter, the "Hirak" delegates did not find support among street leaders of the movement in the south because the latter rejected any association with the north, including a federal one.

The "State Structure" working group consisted of an equal number of northern and southern delegates. Northerners agreed to amend the constitution along federal lines, yet they opposed a two-region formula because they feared it would lead to a redivision of the country. Instead, they favored federation with multiple regions on each side of the old border, as a way to weaken perceptions of north-south division. Most northern delegates favored a six-region formula: four regions in the north, and two in the south. Southerners disapproved of this formula because they did not want to see southern territory divided. Disagreement on the number of federal regions became the NDC's main stumbling block. It could not be resolved by consensual means as required under the conference bylaws. As a result, President Hadi appointed a special executive committee to decide between the two main options. After the NDC ended in January 2014, the committee met and decided the next month to recommend formation of a six-region federal state.

Both President Hadi and his primary deputy on federal matters, Ahmed Bin Mubarak, approved the committee's decision. All parties and factions at the NDC signed an agreement to accept whatever the committee decided, yet Houthi leaders and street leaders of HIRAK strongly criticized the eventual decision to divide northern and southern lands into six regions. This fed growing speculation of possible collaboration between Houthi and HIRAK leaders to obstruct the federal plan. During the NDC conference, Ali Nasser Muhammad's associate, Muhammad Ahmed Ali, agreed to work with Houthi leaders toward a future north-south division of power. Ali Salem al-Bid's presence in Beirut with Hizbullah's consent meant that some of his network undoubtedly saw Houthi rebels as potential allies. But Saudi Arabia and the UAE also hosted pro-HIRAK exiled southern leaders who did not show Houthi sympathies. Former Yemeni prime minister (1990–1994) and president of the PDRY (1986–1990) Haidar al-Attas resided in Riyadh, while al-Bid's former colleague from the Yafea region, Salem Saleh Muhammad, and former southern minister of defense from Lahej province, Haitham Qassem Taher, both lived in Dubai. Thus, HIRAK drew support from regional states that spanned the crude sectarian divide often drawn between Shia and Sunni.

As required by the international agreements upholding Yemen's transition, President Hadi appointed a committee of judges and other legal experts in 2014 to draft a new constitution based upon outcomes of the NDC. To preserve the independence of its members, the committee was sent to the UAE to complete its work outside the increasingly turbulent environment in Sanaa. While the committee was being hosted in Abu Dhabi, Houthi rebel forces fought their way toward Sanaa, invading and occupying the capital in late September 2014. At the same time, yet unrelated to the Houthi decision to occupy Sanaa, UN Special Envoy Jamal Benomar and President Hadi's chief of staff Bin Mubarak held a meeting with Abdulmalik al-Houthi in Saada province hoping to persuade the latter to support the six-region federal plan. According to Bin Mubarak, Abdulmalik al-Houthi forcefully objected, "raising the index finger of his right hand and claiming rightful ownership of all northern lands, leaving the south to southerners" (Bin Mubarak personal interview, 2019).

Soon after the constitution committee submitted its final document to President Hadi in late 2014, Houthi leaders prevented further steps from being taken when they kidnapped Bin Mubarak on January 17, 2015, as he sought authorization for a public referendum on the new constitution. Afterward, Houthi rebels clashed with Hadi's presidential guards, placing

the president under house arrest. The collapse of Yemen's government on the eve of war occurred in part because of lingering problems from the country's old north-south division which the NDC federal plan left unresolved.

### THE WAR YEARS, 2015–2019

Following Bin Mubarak's release and Hadi's escape to Aden in February 2015, Houthi leaders chose to invade southern lands with help from armed forces loyal to Saleh. Speculation of collaboration between Houthi and Hiraq leaders disappeared amid fierce battles pitting Houthi and Hiraq fighters against each other prior to intervention by the GCC states in late March 2015. The capital of al-Dali province was the first place where Southern Resistance forces clashed with invading armies of the Houthi-Saleh alliance in early March.

By April 2015, fighters trained by Aidroos al-Zubaydi and other Hiraq commanders gained the upper hand on the battlefield with air support from the GCC coalition. Once the Houthi-Saleh alliance retreated from al-Dali in late May 2015, al-Zubaydi and his allies, including Shallal Ali Shai and a number of Salafis, joined the fight to drive the alliance's soldiers from the strategic al-Anad air base in Lahej province and the city of Aden (Mused 2019). Intervention by UAE forces was ultimately the deciding factor in the liberation of southern lands. The bulk of troops in the Houthi-Saleh alliance withdrew from Aden and surrounding areas before the end of the summer. Thereafter, the main fighting occurred in the north, although clashes continued in northern al-Dali province and the Beihan district of northwestern Shabwa province.

Throughout the years of war, political conditions in the south, especially Aden, remained unstable for two main reasons. First, President Hadi lacked legitimacy among the population. Due to strong local opposition, his appointees were often forced to disobey presidential orders due to pressure from different sources on the ground. This led to frequent changes in government because Hadi fired officials at will, including major cabinet shuffles. Second, radicals identified with AQAP and ISIS launched numerous terrorist attacks, while occasionally seizing control of territory, such as the capitals of Abyan and Hadramaut provinces during late 2015 and early 2016.

The main fighting in the south pitted GCC-allied forces against groups claiming affiliation with AQAP and ISIS. Leaders of resistance forces typi-

cally blamed isolated attacks by AQAP and ISIS on shadowy groups connected to key northerners in the old regime, whether Saleh or individuals associated with the Islah party, such as the sons of the late Sheikh al-Ahmar and General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar. In other words, they viewed the problem of terrorism through the old lens of north-south rivalry, explaining it as a residual effect of northern domination of the south after the 1994 war.

The first governor of Aden appointed by President Hadi following the city's liberation was Jafar Muhammad Saad. He was assassinated in early December 2015 when his convoy was struck by a powerful car bomb. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack that also killed five body guards (Mukhashaf 2015). Governor Saad was popular in Aden because he was one of the southern military officers who defended the city when Saleh's northern army attacked in 1994. After being exiled in 1994, he joined opposition leaders abroad who formed MOWJ. Following Saad's assassination, President Hadi was forced by the UAE to appoint Aidroos al-Zubaydi as the new governor. Al-Zubaydi was locally recognized as a hero of Aden's liberation in 2015.

Hani Bin Breik, an influential Salafi leader with noteworthy political skills who led Islamist fighters during the liberation of Aden, was simultaneously named minister of state security, while Shallal Ali Shai remained head of the local police force. Although Bin Breik's family is originally from Hadramaut, and he was born and raised in Aden, he studied at the northern Salafi institute *Dar al-Hadith* in Dammaj, Saada province. Governor al-Zubaydi's close relationship with Bin Breik indicated that former southern YSP members could build effective alliances with individuals who earlier came under the influence of Islamist politics in the north.

UAE commanders in Aden encouraged the relationship between al-Zubaydi and Bin Breik because they preferred to recruit Salafis to join the new "Security Belt" forces guarding the hinterland of Lahej and Abyan provinces. The same model was later applied to "Elite Forces" trained by the UAE in Shabwa and Hadramaut provinces. One of the UAE's goals by relying upon Salafis was to marginalize and weaken the Islah party due to the latter's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Salafis were the strongest local opponents of Islah, so Bin Breik became a key ally of the UAE. In essence, the UAE pursued an agenda in Aden similar to its agenda in Cairo, Egypt, during 2013 when it joined Saudi Arabia to finance General al-Sisi's military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government of Muhammad Morsi.

Both Governor al-Zubaydi and Bin Breik reciprocated the favors shown by Emirati leaders, while embracing the UAE's agenda in the south because they considered Islah party to be the main representative of northern interests. To the extent "Security Belt" forces under the command of Governor al-Zubaydi and Minister Bin Breik proceeded to target Islah, the UAE gave its approval. Beginning in 2018, there was a series of assassinations of mosque leaders in Aden who identified with the Islah party (Raghavan 2018). Other Islah supporters were arrested and tortured by UAE-backed security forces. No claim of responsibility was made for the campaign of assassinations.

The repression of Islah members in Aden and the south created tensions with President Hadi and his allies in the north who previously directed Islah party offices in Sanaa. In April 2016, Hadi appointed Islah's strongest northern defender, General al-Ahmar, as his vice president, signaling that the government intended to strengthen its ties to Islah. Another cause of strain between President Hadi and al-Zubaydi's administration in Aden was the latter's effort to advance southern independence. Vice President General al-Ahmar was particularly antagonistic to the idea because he and his close associates held commercial interests in oil and gas resources of Shabwa and Hadramaut provinces. **The idea of southern self-rule drawing on revenues from oil and gas antagonized military commanders associated with General al-Ahmar. Early in the war the family of former President Saleh also maintained loyalist commanders in Hadramaut who opposed southern independence for the same reason.**

Beginning in 2016, Governor al-Zubaydi secretly authorized part of his government staff in Aden to prepare technical reports on how best to implement self-rule in the south (Mused 2019). The reports covered a range of fields including foreign affairs, national security, finance, economic planning, oil and gas development, education, and social affairs. Nothing was published, and the governor never spoke publicly about the reports. Nonetheless, al-Zubaydi was clearly eager to advance southern independence. As a result, he **encouraged UAE commanders to treat the south as a separate region from the north.** This caused President Hadi to criticize Emirati officials for behaving like a foreign occupier on Yemeni territory. Tensions escalated into open confrontation in early 2017 when President Hadi and Governor al-Zubaydi clashed over control of Aden's international airport.

In February 2017, President Hadi's aircraft was denied landing rights at Aden by a security officer acting on the Governor's orders. When Hadi reached the capital on a later date, his presidential guards placed

the airport under siege, causing a tense stand-off with UAE-backed security forces. A ceasefire agreement was negotiated by Saudi officials to avoid further conflict. The agreement required all armed forces to withdraw from the city, yet units commanded by Shallal Ali Shai and Hani Bin Breik remained in Aden with approval from the Governor and the UAE.

Two months later a second aircraft carrying one of Hadi's top military commanders was refused landing rights (*Middle East Eye* 2017). On this occasion, Hadi fired al-Zubaydi, which gave the latter motivation to publicize his secret plans to form an independent state. On May 4, 2017, al-Zubaydi organized the first of two massive street rallies described as "million man" marches. He and Bin Breik accused Hadi of betraying the south as happened in 1994, when Hadi served as Saleh's defense minister during the siege of Aden. One week later on May 11, al-Zubaydi announced his leadership of the Southern Transitional Council. Bin Breik and others were named to an STC cabinet (al-Arabi al-Jadeed 2017). On May 21, Aden's citizens poured onto the streets waving the old southern flag and calling for national independence.

During al-Zubaydi's time as governor, he faced terrorist bombings and attempted assassinations. According to some reports, he survived more than a handful of attacks. But after the STC's formation, his clashes with Hadi's presidential guards were more deadly. On January 21, 2018, al-Zubaydi gave the president an ultimatum to fire his prime minister, Ahmed Bin Daghr, while dismissing the minister of interior Ahmed al-Maysari and other cabinet members who opposed the STC. One week later after Hadi failed to respond, al-Zubaydi's deputies Hani Bin Breik and Shallal Ali Shai led street battles described by Bin Daghr as a military coup (Mukhashaf 2018; Forster 2018). During fighting on January 28–30, STC forces routed Hadi's guards in the main districts of Crater and Khormaksar. They seized a major guard base in the northern district of Dar Saad, using tanks and heavy artillery. Bin Daghr became trapped inside Hadi's seaside presidential palace near Maasheq Beach. According to the International Red Cross, there were dozens killed and nearly 200 injured in fighting across the city. Once again, Saudi Arabia intervened to arrange a ceasefire.

Citizens of Aden celebrated the STC victory with fireworks at night. Thus, al-Zubaydi, Bin Breik, and the STC were manifestly more popular than President Hadi and members of his government. Although Bin Daghr initially refused to step down, he was forced to resign in October 2018 following days of civil unrest when the STC called for a popular uprising to protest corruption and economic stagnation (*Middle East Eye*

2018). Conditions in Aden were ripe for al-Zubaydi and the STC to take control in late 2018. But al-Zubaydi's allies in the UAE feared that this would undermine Hadi's authority, potentially destroying the GCC coalition, while relieving pressure on the Houthis in the north. As a result, al-Zubaydi and Bin Breik begrudgingly accepted the need to wait until a second clash with Hadi's security forces during early August 2019, when the STC seized the presidential palace in Aden.

## CONCLUSION

The STC lacked universal support in the south, especially outside Aden and al-Zubaydi's home province of al-Dali, because President Hadi still retained key supporters who commanded military and security forces allied with the GCC coalition in Lahej, Abyan, Shabwa, and Hadramaut provinces (Salisbury 2018). This included former southern military officers who supported Hiraq and joined the resistance in 2015. In other words, the earlier divisions within Hiraq's leadership prevented the STC from gaining full support of its agenda. Opposition to the STC included Hiraq leaders who opposed the GCC coalition. Hasan Ba Awm, the YSP leader from Hadramaut, was the sharpest critic of the STC. He and other members of the Supreme Council of the Revolutionary Movement for the Liberation and Independence of the South accused al-Zubaydi and the STC of allying with a foreign occupying power, the UAE (Sumeeh 2017). Exiled leader Ali Nasser Muhammad also voiced criticism of the STC.

In 2019, al-Zubaydi and his deputies tried to build greater southern solidarity by holding sessions of the STC national assembly outside Aden. They also encouraged greater "southern dialogue," calling Ali Nasser Muhammad and Ali Salem al-Bid to participate. The STC national assembly is envisioned as a future parliament of an independent South Arabia. Its third session in February 2019 was held at al-Mukalla, the coastal capital of Hadramaut province, near al-Bid's home (Aden Press 2019). The attempt to establish an independent South Arabia must include Hadramaut and its eastern neighbor al-Mahra province because they combine to make up more than two-thirds of all southern territory, while containing the most valuable petroleum resources.

During the STC national assembly in al-Mukalla, President Hadi announced plans to revive Yemen's old House of Representatives, which was inactive during the war. Hadi initially said he would invite northern and southern representatives to Aden. STC leaders warned against the



idea, claiming they would resist such an attempt. In April 2019, Hadi chose to hold a parliamentary meeting in Saiyun, a city inside the main inland canyon of Hadramaut (al-Arabiya 2019). Due to the close proximity of Saiyun to al-Mukalla, Hadi clearly sought to undermine STC claims to govern in the name of all Hadramaut, let alone all South Arabia.

Aidroos al-Zubaydi and STC leaders focused the rest of their energies on foreign policy by pursuing diplomatic relations overseas. They established offices in Washington, London, Moscow, and other capitals to lobby foreign governments about South Arabia's claim to independent statehood. This marked a further stage in the evolution of southern politics from peaceful protest to armed resistance, and finally, the quest to restore international recognition. Before seizing power in Aden one month after Emirati leaders announced a partial withdrawal of their forces in July 2019, al-Zubaydi and Bin Breik had already visited London and Moscow to meet representatives of government. Both Britain and Russia have strong historical ties to Aden when it served as capital of a separate southern state. Thus, STC leaders believed there was more potential to gain recognition in one or both places.

During their visits abroad, STC leaders emphasized South Arabia's readiness to revive its place on the world stage based upon pre-1990 foreign relations. **A primary STC foreign policy is its declared support for counter-terrorism efforts against al-Qaeda and ISIS. STC leaders embraced Saudi and Emirati attempts to blame the problem of terrorism on the governments of Iran and Qatar, hoping to capitalize on Saudi and Emirati opposition to Houthi rebel leaders of Ansar Allah and followers of the Muslim Brotherhood in Islah.** But political differences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE created a risk for STC leaders, as became clear when Saudi-allied forces under the command of President Hadi and his vice president launched a counterattack in late August 2019, moving swiftly through Shabwa and Abyan provinces to reach the outskirts of Aden (Walsh and al-Batati 2019). The STC's hold on the southern capital appeared to depend upon defensive actions of the UAE air force.

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