



MALCOLM H. KERR
CARNEGIE MIDDLE EAST CENTER



MARCH 2022

The Barriers to Southern Yemeni Political Aspirations Are Mainly in the South

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As Yemen's conflict rages on, one of the principal challenges for the country has become the implementation of the political aspirations of southern Yemenis. The takeover in September 2014 of Sana'a by Ansar Allah, better known as the Houthi movement, and the military intervention of a Saudi-led Arab coalition in March 2015 to reverse Houthi advances, had a direct impact on developments in the south. Because of the war, Yemen's southern governorates have seen an opportunity to redefine their relationship with the rest of the country. Their demands have ranged from securing greater autonomy in a united Yemen to outright secession and the restoration of a south Yemeni state, like the one that existed before the unification agreement of May 1990 that created a single Republic of Yemen.¹

While the tendency is to assume that the main obstacle to altering the status of the southern governorates is the fraught relationship between north and south, this is a misconception. The biggest problem that southern political groups face is the existence of rivalries among themselves. The militarization of these groups during the

war, like the weakness of the internationally recognized Yemeni government, has given southerners the latitude to manage their own affairs and potentially implement their political aims. This was demonstrated most vividly by the establishment of the [Southern Transitional Council \(STC\)](#) in 2017, with the backing of the United Arab Emirates. However, the rise of the STC, which seeks a clean break with the north, has also revealed the divisions among southern groups, as the council does not represent the views of all southerners, [nor do many southern political actors approve of its agenda](#).

THE REVIVAL OF THE SOUTHERN MOVEMENT

The mobilization of what can be called the Southern Movement began in 2007, when political groupings in the south began working to reverse unification with northern Yemen. It started with protests and strikes demanding rights for demobilized soldiers and employees from the former South Yemen—or what had been called the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen



(PDRY) (see map 1). The protests had their roots in developments that followed the 1994 civil war, in which northern forces, under then president Ali Abdullah Saleh, defeated the south, under Ali Salem al-Beidh, after its [declaration of secession in May of that year](#). In the aftermath of the north's victory, Saleh [demobilized or dismissed](#) thousands of members of the military and civil servants who were from the south.

Yemen. Building upon this, the demonstrations in 2007 soon grew into a broad and deep call for reform of the relationship between south and north, reviving the divisions that had led to the 1994 conflict. Southern leaders felt they had been disadvantaged in the unified state. On the negative side, however, there were also signs of a lack of consensus over the best way to progress, hinting at future rifts among southern leaders.

Once the war ended, southern leaders [formed a variety of groups or alliances](#) that reaffirmed a collective dissatisfaction with their condition in post-unity

Among the groups established were the National Front for the Southern Resistance, known as Mawj, founded in 1994 by Abdul Rahman al-Jafri; the Movement for

Map 1: The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY)



the Right of Self-Determination, or Hatm, formed in 1995 by Aydarus al-Zubaydi; the Movement for the Reform of the Unity Track, established in 1996 by leaders of the Yemeni Socialist Party, South Yemen's former ruling party; the Southern Popular Committees, set up in 1998 by another group of leaders from the Yemeni Socialist Party; and the Southern Democratic Assembly—London, founded in 2004 by Abdullah al-Ahmad and Awad Rashid, among other groups. At the time, Saleh exploited the disagreements among such organizations to strengthen his influence and undermine their demands.

In 2006, the Radfan Charitable Association, established in Aden to serve the people of the district of Radfan in the south, sought to address the consequences of internal conflicts in the region and bridge gaps among its multiple political forces. It launched the [Forgiveness and Reconciliation Initiative](#) to unify the efforts of southern leaders. The Saleh regime quickly closed the association and blocked the initiative. However, the fact that a unification of efforts was seen as necessary implied that a main obstacle to achieving the demands of the Southern Movement was its internal fragmentation.

The southern protests of 2007 took place at a time when Saleh was caught up in a confrontation with opposition parties united in what was known as the [Joint Meeting Parties \(JMP\)](#). This was a coalition that included, among others, the Yemeni Socialist Party and the Islah Party, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The standoff followed Saleh's reelection as president in September 2006, when he sought to tighten his grip on power even as political and economic conditions as well as corruption [were growing worse](#). Saleh was also engaged then in an [armed conflict with the Houthis](#), who had expanded into new areas of Saadah Governorate in the north.

These clashes provoked nationwide displeasure, adding to the discontent in the south. This situation revitalized the Southern Movement and led to [Beidh's resurgence](#) and that of other politicians who had served in the

former South Yemen. The period also saw the rise of new political formations, including the Supreme National Council for the Liberation and Independence of the South, the National Body for the Independence of the South, the National Body for the Peaceful Struggle, and the Leadership Council of the Peaceful Revolution for the Liberation of the South. All those groups put forward demands for the south, and each saw itself as a valid representative of the region.

Regardless of southern antagonism for Saleh, many leaders in the south were active in his General People's Congress and sought to maintain good ties with the regime. This exposed cracks in southern attitudes. These had already been apparent in the war of 1994, when Saleh's military victory was made possible thanks to the collaboration of Beidh's southern opponents, among them Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, [who fought the secessionists](#) and would later become Saleh's vice president before ultimately replacing him. The cracks were also evident in the presidential election of 2006, when JMP parties nominated as their candidate Faisal bin Shamlan, a southern politician from Hadramawt Governorate. Despite his origins, a number of southern groups [sided with Saleh](#).

[Protests continued in the south on a regular basis](#) during Saleh's remaining years in office. However, the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, which led to mass demonstrations in Sana'a and other cities, had special resonance in southern governorates, adding new momentum to the existing unrest. While this seemed to present renewed opportunities for the Southern Movement, it also brought challenges, including the intervention of regional powers. This included Iran, which wanted to have a say in Yemeni politics and so increased its support for Beidh. Consequently, in Lebanon, the pro-Iranian Hezbollah party [trained hundreds of combatants](#) belonging to southern groups.

In October 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council sponsored a [political agreement to resolve the Yemeni crisis](#). Under the arrangement, Saleh relinquished



power and was replaced by Hadi. This was an important step for the Southern Movement, as Hadi hails from the southern governorate of Abyan. To reach a consensus around a common vision for the south's representation in a post-Saleh Yemen, political figures from the area, including former South Yemeni president [Ali Nasser Mohammed](#) and Haidar Abu Bakr al-Attas, the first prime minister of a united Yemen, organized a [conference in Cairo](#) in November. [Its main outcomes](#) were the adoption of a two-region federal system, dividing Yemen into the former north and south, with a federal government presiding over the two. This would end with a referendum on self-determination for the south after five years. The conference also called for the establishment of a council to act as a coordination body for southern political groups.

Though the conclusions of the Cairo conference became some of the clearest expressions of southern goals, divisions among the parties prevented implementation of what had been agreed. Hadi, whose nomination as Saleh's successor was formalized when he was elected president in February 2012, enlisted some of the conference participants to join the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), launched in March 2013. Although the NDC provided a [forum for the Southern Movement to discuss the south's future with all political parties in Yemen](#), the issue of who represented the south sparked intense rivalries. Some southern political forces felt that those participating in the NDC did not benefit from the support in the south that would entitle them to decide on the region's future. Such criticism increased when the NDC released its conclusions, proposing a federal state consisting of six regions—four in the north and two in the south. Southern secessionists [rejected this](#), preferring a complete break with the north. The [Houthis' takeover of Sana'a](#) effectively suspended all agreements that had been reached after Saleh's departure.

THE BARRIER OF INTERNAL DIVISIONS IN THE SOUTH

With the Houthis' seizure of the capital and the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in 2015, political dynamics in Yemen changed significantly. Regional intervention in the south became a [major factor](#) determining the behavior of political forces there that had sought a change in ties with the rest of the country. At the same time, southern groups remained fragmented, [disagreeing over the way they envisaged their region's future](#).

In May 2017, [a number of southern political figures and movements established the STC](#), which has become the most prominent actor in the south today. The council is headed by al-Zubaydi, whom Hadi removed as governor of Aden Governorate in April 2017. The STC's rise took place amid the [differing priorities](#) of the members of the Saudi-led coalition. The United Arab Emirates supported the Southern Movement against the Hadi administration, which is backed by Saudi Arabia. The reason for this was that the UAE wanted to ensure that it could control Yemen's maritime routes through the Gulf of Aden, which is critical for its trade. Having influence over the south, especially coastal areas, was necessary to advance this objective.

However, intra-south disagreements [remain present within the STC's leadership](#). These [often reflect older rivalries](#) that had existed in the PDRY's Yemeni Socialist Party between leaders from Dhaleh and Lahj Governorates, on the one side, and Abyan and Shabwa Governorates, on the other. Today, the STC's leadership tends to come from Dhaleh and Lahj, while Hadi's supporters are concentrated in Shabwa and Abyan, the president's home regions. Nevertheless, the STC controls large swathes of southern governorates, notably Aden, Dhaleh, Soctora, and even parts of Lahj and Abyan.

In October 2019, the STC declared that it had set up its own administration in areas under its control, before

the Saudi-led [coalition brokered the Riyadh Agreement](#) between Hadi and the transitional council. The agreement described the STC as a major representative of the southern cause. However, other southern groupings were also part of the agreement, including the [Hadi-backed Southern National Coalition](#), a rival of the STC, as well as additional parties, including the Hadramawt Inclusive Conference and the General Council for the People of Mahra and Socotra. Some southern groups follow a different line than the agreement's signatories. Moreover, regional states today have major influence over these organizations, defining many of their priorities.

Although southern political actors have long relied on a narrative of northern dominance to describe the crisis the south faces, this no longer really applies. Currently, it is Yemen's northern regions that are facing the brunt of war and that are weak within the Hadi-led government, while the south is in a stronger position than previously. That explains why the future of the south will be largely determined by the tensions among the region's own political forces.

A prevailing view in the south is that the unification process of 1990 was not properly thought through. Saleh wanted any achievement to reinforce his position, while Beidh wished to transcend the internal fractures resulting from the South Yemen civil war of 1986, as well as the economic crisis in the previously pro-Soviet country following the Soviet Union's collapse. This interpretation is supported by the nature of the unity agreement, which failed to take into account key issues—such as the merging of the militaries, which economic policies to pursue, and the political institutions that would prevail, among others. This facilitated the war of 1994 and the defeat of the PDRY's ruling elites.

The core reason for the [recurring conflicts in the south](#) is tied to the matter of representation among southern political organizations, which have vied to portray themselves as the most legitimate representatives of the southern cause. The conflict over representation

is rooted in the south's social and demographic composition and has revived undercurrents that were visible during the time Britain governed the region, the post-independence phase, and the period that followed unification. There are three primary factors that have fueled southern divisions.

The first is a historical legacy of fragmentation. The southern reality today cannot be separated from the period of British rule. Initially, Britain focused on controlling Aden and its port, strategically located on the sea lane to India and Asia. This had two main repercussions in Aden, which Britain secured in 1839. It allowed for the city's development but also separated it from its hinterland, which did not experience similar modernization. Britain preferred to deal with the regions outside Aden through tribal sheikhs or other traditional leaders, later signing protectorate agreements with them to guarantee the port city's stability. After Britain withdrew from Aden in 1967, the region [fell under the control of the National Liberation Front \(NLF\)](#). The diverse arrangements that Britain had introduced, as well as the bitter rivalry between the two leading groups fighting for independence, the NLF and the Front for the Liberation of South Yemen (FLOSY), left a fragmented political landscape that would endure (see map 2).

A second factor has been the conflict between center and periphery. This was manifested in the tensions between the NLF and FLOSY. The leadership of FLOSY was mostly made up of civilian figures from Aden who favored political means, such as protests, to achieve independence.² In contrast, much of the leadership of the NLF hailed from rural areas and was at odds with FLOSY's approach, adopting armed struggle to liberate the south. This preference was shared by many others in areas around Aden. Ultimately, the NLF prevailed, but the tensions between urban and rural elites lasted.

Beyond the urban-rural rivalry, there was also an intra-rural rivalry evident in the political and leadership structures of the PDRY and its Yemeni Socialist Party. In

Map 2: Federation of South Arabia and the Protectorate of South Arabia



January 1986, this led to a bloody showdown between two different wings of the party, Abdel Fattah Ismail's Tughmah faction and Ali Nasser Mohammed's Zumra faction, causing thousands of casualties.³ There were multiple reasons for the conflict, tied to disagreements over the management of the state, unification with the north, relations between the south and foreign countries, and, more symbolically, control over the urban center of Aden, among others. The conflict also took on a geographic dimension, as the leaders of Tughma came from Dhaleh and Lahj, while those from Zumra came

from Abyan and Shabwa, a division that persists today in the STC and among some of its opponents. Each group has its specific alliances and relationships in the rest of southern Yemen, northern Yemen, and among regional powers now active in the country.

The third reason for the disagreements over representation of the south is related to the political preferences of certain southern regions. This has historical antecedents, tied to Britain's attempt to unite its southern Yemeni allies into a Federation of South

Arabia in April 1962. The authorities of the eastern areas of Hadramawt, Mahra, and parts of Shabwa refused to join the federation, preferring to be autonomous. Independence from Britain in 1967 united all southern areas into one state, centered in Aden, but the chronic conflicts within the capital only deepened the desire of the inhabitants of these three areas to regain their [autonomy](#). This yearning [survives to this day](#).

How the south's relationship with northern Yemen will develop remains unknown, largely because there is no clarity as to the outcome of the country's war. However, the conflict has only accentuated the rifts in southern Yemen, many of which are anchored in the past. Tensions between north and south were more pronounced when Saleh was in power, so that northern domination was the main driver of divergences, not divisions among southern groups. However, Hadi's election focused attention on the differences between the president, a southerner, and southern groups, which sharply accentuated southern divisions. With the north paying a heavy price from the violence today, more than ever it is developments specific to the south itself that will determine that region's future.

CONCLUSION

The divisions among southern political organizations should not detract from the fact that, in the past, southern demands were just. Yet political rivalries gave southern politicians, as well as political actors from outside the south—in northern Yemen or in regional countries—the latitude to exploit southern aims for their own ends.

This regrettable situation is why southerners must seek agreement among themselves over their relationship with the rest of Yemen. Any such effort must begin with a transparent dialogue. The south today is very different than the independent country that existed before 1990. This means that those who want to secede should be aware of the preferences of communities for whom autonomy makes more sense than reviving South Yemen. By reaching a common vision, southern political forces would be better able to guarantee stability for their region amid widespread instability and to ensure that they will be able to preserve their interests once the country's conflict is over.

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NOTES

- 1 The analysis in this article draws on the author's ongoing experiences and conversations in Yemen, including with several southern activists and journalists across the south region.
- 2 Fawwaz Traboulsi, *Jnub al-Yaman fi Hikm al-Yasar* [South Yemen Under the Rule of the Left] (Beirut: Riad El-Rayyes Books, December 2015), 37.
- 3 Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), Chapter 10.



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