

YEMEN: ON THE BRINK

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The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement

Stephen Day

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Dealing with the Southern Movement simply as a security threat linked to the problem of terrorism, without addressing the underlying political problems that gave rise to it, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

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YEMEN

- International Boundaries
- Governorate Boundaries
- - - Former North/South Boundary (approx.)
- ★ Country Capital
- ⊙ Governorate Capital



Key Names and Organizations

General People's Congress (GPC)

- Northern-based ruling party of united Yemen
- Current leader: Yemeni President **Ali Abdullah Saleh**, who had led party since its founding in 1982
- Presumed successor: the president's son, **Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh**
- Rival to succeed the president: **Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar**, military commander and member of Saleh's local Hashid tribe from Sanhan near Sanaa. Al-Ahmar also tied to Islamic groups
- Current vice president: **Abdo-Rabo Mansour Hadi**, formerly of the southern YSP before an intra-regime battle in Aden in 1986 caused him to leave into exile

Islah (Reform)

- Northern-based Islamic opposition party
- Led by **Sheikh Abdullah Hussayn al-Ahmar** from its founding after unification in 1990 until his death in 2007; Sheikh al-Ahmar also led Saleh's Hashid tribe. Tribal leadership has passed to al-Ahmar's son, Sadeq
- Interim leader **Muhammad al-Yadumi**; other key figures include Sheikh al-Ahmar's son, **Hamid Abdullah al-Ahmar**; and president of Iman University **Sheikh Abdul-Magid al-Zindani**, who has long associated with Islamic militant movements and was linked in the past to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP)

- Former southern ruling party and partner in unity with GPC
- Led by **Ali Salem al-Beidh**, who served as vice president of Yemen until a 1994 war with Saleh forced him into exile; other YSP members in exile include former prime minister **Haider al-Attas**, and former southern president **Ali Nasser Muhammad**, who fled South Yemen in 1986 after clashing with a faction led by al-Beidh
- Currently led by the secretary general of the party inside Yemen, **Dr. Yasin Said Noman**

The "Southern Movement"

- Loosely organized regional opposition in southern provinces
- Initially started by retired southern army general **Nasir Ali an-Nuba**, but currently serves as a political umbrella for multiple southern opposition groups, some who claim former YSP leader and vice president **Ali Salem al-Beidh** as the champion of their cause. The movement was joined in 2009 by **Sheikh Tareq al-Fadhli**, a former southern ally of President Saleh in the GPC

Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP)

- Local branch of the international terrorist group
- Led by **Nasser al-Wahayshi**, presumed to operate in the northern province of Marib

Al-Huthi Rebellion

- Armed northern Zaydi religious opposition
- Led by **Sheikh Abdul-Malik Badreddin al-Huthi**, who took charge after his older brother Hussayn was killed by the Yemeni army in 2004

Summary

Three opposition groups within Yemen are undermining that country's stability. The newest, called the Southern Movement, has been less militant than al-Qaeda or the al-Huthi rebels on the northern border with Saudi Arabia. It began in 2007 and used peaceful means to seek redress of problems rooted in the troubled unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. The creation of the new state has meant problems for residents of the South: issues of national identity, economic grievances, and concerns over access to political power.

The central government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh has cracked down on the Southern Movement, but this pressure has radicalized the group. It now presents a greater threat to the regime in Sanaa. Many supporters are demanding secession, and they want to rebuild the former southern state. More dangerously, there are signs that the Southern Movement might be forming ties with al-Qaeda.

The Southern Movement challenges Yemen's political status quo, which could help al-Qaeda by increasing instability in the country. The real danger, however, is that the movement might be conflated with al-Qaeda and targeted for military methods of counterterrorism. Such actions would magnify al-Qaeda's role in Yemen and worsen the problem of terrorism there.

The Yemeni regime can prevent further radicalization of the Southern Movement and avoid strengthening its ties with al-Qaeda. To do so it must address the political and economic problems that gave rise to the movement and increase southerners' access to power, which is currently held chiefly by the president, his family, and his Hashid tribe.

Recommendations:

- Arab leaders, not Western leaders, should represent the global community and push President Saleh to address the Southern Movement's political grievances. Saleh must negotiate with exiled leaders from the South, expedite a more equal distribution of economic resources, and begin the hard process of national reconciliation.
- The Yemeni government should stamp out corruption, respect human rights, and allow political opponents to organize peacefully. Political prisoners, including hundreds arrested during street demonstrations, should be released, and recent encroachments on freedoms of the press should be reversed.

- The government and representatives of the Southern Movement need to open talks that include exiled southern leaders and southern women, who lost social standing after merging with the more conservative North. Members of the exiled southern business community and the former southern ruling class also should be involved in the reconciliation effort.
- The future structure of the Yemeni state will determine whether national reconciliation is possible. While the continued unity of Yemen is worth protecting, it may be best to devolve government power in a new federal or confederal system to build inter-regional respect and stimulate greater economic development.

Dealing with the Southern Movement simply as a security threat linked to the problem of terrorism, without addressing the underlying political problems that gave rise to it, can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Three opposition groups threaten the stability of Yemen, and possibly its survival within its current borders. The two more menacing groups—al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the armed Huthi rebellion—have received the lion's share of international attention. But foreign observers should look more closely at the third, the Southern Movement, which has recently been undergoing a radical transformation. When the Southern Movement surfaced in 2007, its demands were moderate: equality with citizens in the nation's North; jobs; greater local decision-making power; and more control over the South's economic resources, including Yemen's largest oil field at al-Maseela in Hadramaut province. Today, some elements within the Southern Movement are urging secession from Yemen and reestablishment of an independent South Yemen (or what is called "South Arabia" by those more virulently opposed to the 1990 unification with Yemenis in the North). Recent developments also hint that the Southern Movement is developing ties with al-Qaeda, even though the former had a different origin with different goals pursued by peaceful and democratic means.

The Southern Movement started as a reaction to the mishandling of Yemen's unification over the past two decades. This unity process failed to solve basic problems of national identity, economic development, and political governance. Many in the South believe President Ali Abdullah Saleh, his family, and his Hashid tribe have discriminated against them while exploiting the South's resources for personal gain. At its outset, the Southern Movement represented a political challenge to the regime. But if domestic problems continue to be mishandled, the Southern Movement might threaten the state, particularly if its members cooperate with al-Qaeda. Last year Nasser al-Wahayshi, the leader of AQAP, declared support for the Southern Movement and its goal of secession, expressing his hopes to see an independent Islamic state in the South, where

AQAP could establish a new base of operations.¹ Al-Wahayshi does not set the agenda of the Southern Movement, and there is no evidence that southern leaders share his dream of an Islamic state, but the Southern Movement clearly challenges Yemen's political status quo, risking greater instability. This presents a dilemma for policy makers. On the one hand, the instability resulting from the Southern Movement's activities creates an environment in which AQAP can deepen its roots and grow strong, especially if the Southern Movement becomes more radical. On the other hand, if the Southern Movement is conflated with al-Qaeda and military force is used to repress its civilian supporters, there is an equal or greater risk of magnifying AQAP's role in the South and worsening the problem of terrorism emanating from Yemen.

A Mishandled Unification Process

Across history Yemenis rarely have been unified under common rule. The country's geography—tall mountains in the West around the capital Sanaa, a large interior desert, and a remarkable canyon system in the East known as Wadi Hadramaut—created and perpetuated divisions in pre-Islamic times. In the Islamic period distinct religious schools and ruling systems emerged. Zaydis, followers of a minor Shi'i school of Islam, dominated the western mountain plateau, eventually establishing an imamate. Shafi'is, followers of a major Sunni school of Islam, prevailed along the Red Sea and lowlands south of Sanaa. Geography kept the Sunna and Shi'a separate, preventing much conflict between the groups. But Yemenis also developed greater accommodation than Muslims elsewhere, so Zaydis and Shafi'is coexisted when their lives intersected.

Yemen's North-South division originated from a treaty between the British and Ottoman empires in 1904. After World War I, a Zaydi imam replaced the Ottomans in the North, but Shafi'i southerners refused to accept him as religious sovereign, instead strengthening their alliances with the British. The northern Zaydi imams pursued a xenophobic policy that kept their population isolated in high mountain towns and villages. In the South British rule prevailed, and officials used the port city of Aden as a base from which they could loosely supervise traditional rulers in neighboring regions. Later in the mid-twentieth century the British created a federation of sultanates and emirates in South Arabia, but jealousies and rivalries between traditional rulers undermined the system.

This relatively stable if stagnant situation was upset in the 1960s. In 1962 a military coup d'état by pro-Nasser, Arab nationalist officers in the North was followed by a long civil war there. Its settlement in 1967 signaled a conservative tilt to highland Zaydi elites and tribal sheikhs, who remain dominant in the country today. Unrest continued in the North throughout the 1970s and 1980s, with an armed rebellion in the "midlands," a largely Shafi'i region

stretching inland from mountains near the Red Sea to the cities of Ibb and Taiz halfway between Sanaa and Aden. This rebellion was supported by South Yemen, which had gained independence from Britain on November 30, 1967, after a long guerrilla war that began in 1963. Marxists came to power in the south in 1969, and the new regime was so concerned about regional factionalism that it stopped using territorial names, adopting a numerical system for its provinces (“one” through “six”) and sub-districts. Yet divisions persisted in the South as they did in the North.

Border disputes between North and South led to war in 1972 and 1979, yet despite these conflicts and the two states' different political orientations, they continued to discuss unification. In the early 1980s they drafted a joint “unity constitution.” The process proceeded in fits and starts and was heavily influenced in 1984 by the discovery of oil in the North and in 1986 by internal divisions that weakened the South. Both factors strengthened northern president Saleh's hand during the late 1980s, allowing him to negotiate with the South from a position of strength. Yemen's oil deposits near the North-South border were modest by the standards of the region, but they provided incentives for the South to cooperate in joint exploration. In January 1986 the South's ruling Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) split, and factional fighting sent President Ali Nasser Muhammad and tens of thousands of supporters fleeing north across the border, where Saleh welcomed them. Saleh played the exiled YSP faction against those who remained in Aden, until reaching a unity agreement with the new southern head of state, Ali Salem al-Beidh, in late 1989. Al-Beidh assured that Ali Nasser Muhammad's partisans were excluded from the deal, and Ali Nasser left for exile in Syria.

North and South Yemen united on May 22, 1990, under a transitional power-sharing formula that attempted to balance political power between northern and southern officials until the country's first democratic elections. The northern population was, and remains, four to five times larger than that of the South, so Sanaa became the seat of government while Saleh served as interim president. The southern YSP leader al-Beidh accepted the vice president's post. Another southerner from Hadramaut, Haidar Abdallah al-Attas, became prime minister in charge of cabinet affairs. The executive authority of government was a five-person body comprising three northerners and two southerners. Thus Saleh clearly held the swing vote on crucial matters of state policy. Cabinet posts were filled nearly evenly with northern and southern ministers, each assisted by deputies from the other side. Despite these arrangements, real unification never took place. Northern and southern officials occupied rival floors of ministry buildings. Al-Beidh appointed a close associate to be oil minister, but oil revenues were controlled at the ministry of finance, where Saleh's minister kept the upper hand. The two armed forces were not integrated, or placed under a single command, although a few units on each side were moved across the border. In 1994 these cross-border bases became

flash points of armed conflict that ultimately resulted in a northern military triumph.

The final blow to Yemen's tenuous unity was the political stalemate that followed the country's first national election on April 27, 1993. The election had been delayed six months because of tensions created by assassinations of southern politicians in Sanaa. Responsibility for the killings was never clearly established, but rumors ran rampant; those accused ranged from northern security forces to *mujahideen* returning from Afghanistan and venting their anti-Soviet anger on former Marxist officials. This dangerously charged atmosphere led Yemenis to regard the election as a winner-takes-all event. But election results were inconclusive.²

Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) gained 40 percent of the seats in parliament but received only 28 percent of the vote. Islah, a northern Islamist party whose name means "reform," was the direct descendant of an Islamic front Saleh created in the 1970s to staunch the spread of southern Marxist influence; it gained 21 percent of the seats. The YSP placed third, with 18 percent of the seats and 18 percent of the votes. The remaining seats were won by independent candidates and small parties. The YSP swept the polls in the southern districts by landslide margins, affirming its strength as a regional party. Most GPC and Islah candidates barely won pluralities in hotly contested northern districts. The GPC won the largest share of parliamentary seats, but it failed to demonstrate its popularity with more than 80 percent of the population living in the North. The YSP's southern landslide left intact its claim to represent regional interests in the South.

After the election, YSP leaders argued that they had the right to rule the South and proposed a new federal constitutional system with decentralized political power. Northern leaders interpreted any talk of federalism as a plot to secede. Saleh insisted on forming a three-way coalition, with the GPC holding a majority position. But YSP leaders refused to accept anything less than a continued 50-50 share of power with the president's party. The impasse remained until King Hussein of Jordan helped negotiate Yemen's Document of Pledge and Accord (DPA), signed by all parties in Amman in February 1994. Any hopes for peace were short-lived. In late April 1994, fighting broke out at an encampment of southern soldiers near Sanaa. The fighting quickly escalated into full-scale warfare between the armies of the North and South. On May 20, after three weeks of clashes involving Scud missiles lobbed into Sanaa, military aircraft, and heavy artillery, former southern leader Ali Salem al-Beidh formally declared secession. Battles dragged on until July 7, when Saleh's troops marched into Aden while al-Beidh and colleagues fled the country.

The tumult of 1994 reverberates today in the actions of the Southern Movement. Many of its members consider al-Beidh the exiled champion of their cause. Saleh had offered a general amnesty at the end of fighting, but he accused al-Beidh and more than a dozen others of treason. All were tried in

absentia, convicted, and sentenced to death, although the sentences were later dropped. Saleh reached out to southerners by promising to decentralize government, as the Amman DPA stipulated, and allow the election of provincial governors and district managers. But most of Saleh's postwar initiatives were calculated to concentrate power in his own hands.

Before the end of the summer in 1994 President Saleh had the unity constitution amended, removing institutions of joint rule and broader distributions of power and granting himself more executive authority to rule by decree.³ He appointed some southerners, including Vice President Abdul-Rabo Mansour Hadi, to high government posts, but these posts were largely symbolic; lower-ranking northerners served at the president's bidding to prevent any acquisition of independent authority. Saleh also exploited regional and tribal divisions, "dancing on the heads of snakes" as he likes telling visiting journalists, to strengthen his hold on power.⁴ At first he relied on the southern "Ali Nasser partisans" who had fled during the 1986 fighting, and whom al-Beidh had excluded at the time of unity. Hadi is from this group, and like Ali Nasser its members primarily originate from Abyan and Shabwah provinces. Later Saleh turned to southern refugees who had fled Marxist rule at the end of the 1960s.

In the weeks following the 1994 war, northern politicians, military officers, tribal sheikhs, and businessmen descended on southern cities, seeking to profit from the defeat of al-Beidh's army. Many northerners occupied the homes of YSP officials who had fled the country. Some southerners talked of the South being "colonized" by the North, yet few offered much resistance; most were too exhausted after eight years of turmoil in their lives. The influx of northerners was followed by the spread of corruption in southern provincial bodies, leading to a perception that the president's family and tribe were enriching themselves on southern resources. Southern lands are less densely populated than those of the North, but they are nearly twice as large and richer in mineral wealth. After unification Yemen's largest oilfield was discovered in Hadramaut province near Ali Salem al-Beidh's home; crude oil production began at al-Maseela field in July 1993. This elevated tensions prior to the 1994 war, and the continued exploitation of southern oil fields remains a source of grievance today. Southerners feel that the wealth generated from their lands is disproportionately distributed to President Saleh's northern military and security forces that are repressing the southern people.

Rise of the Southern Movement

Yemen's unification in 1990 failed to forge a national bond between northerners and southerners. Instead it exposed their divisions, calling into question whether the people form a true nation, with shared social and cultural memories. The project of unity was not helped by an economic crisis that began in the 1990s and grew worse in the next decade. On May 22, 2005, the fifteenth

anniversary of unification, President Saleh reached out to southerners by holding the annual unification ceremonies in al-Mukalla, an eastern provincial capital in what had been South Yemen. But only two years later, the Southern Movement burst onto the scene in al-Mukalla and other cities throughout the South with sit-ins, strikes, and demonstrations. The Southern Movement fed on the region's grievances following unification and the war of 1994, and the government's failure to decentralize or expand local government. Saleh's tactics of building patronage with tribes using oil revenues was ill-adapted to the detribalized south. He was further weakened by his close relations with the United States after 9/11, especially during the U.S.-led war in Iraq, which most Yemenis opposed.

After Yemen's 1994 war, the central government dragged its feet on decentralizing power, branding those who pressed for this change as "secessionists" in league with the exiled YSP leaders. It took more than five years for the government to pass its "Local Authority" legislation, and the first local elections were not held until February 2001. Once elected local councils were seated, they were allowed only to consult with the administrators who hold real local authority by appointment of the central government. The councils received inadequate resources to carry out their work, so the experience proved highly disappointing.

By the mid-2000s most citizens in the South had lost trust in Saleh, realizing that he intended to maintain a tight grip on national revenues and policy planning. This loss of trust united the opposition in southern provinces, where citizens understood that real change would come only through solidarity and protest. Once the Southern Movement's protests began in 2007, the president moved further toward fulfilling his promise of decentralization. In May 2008 he suddenly allowed the indirect election of provincial governors by members of the powerless local councils. But because ordinary citizens were barred from voting, this half-measure failed to placate supporters of the Southern Movement.

The movement gained further momentum because Saleh had exhausted his ability to pit tribe against tribe and faction against faction in the south. After the 1994 civil war, members of Saleh's ruling circle thought they could strengthen their control over the southern regions by pursuing a tribal policy, as they did in the North through their own Hashid tribe. But South Yemen's former Marxist government had detribalized the country in the 1970s. From an early stage, the southern regime criminalized acts of tribal revenge, imposing law and order through an assertion of state power. Traditional sheikhs lost their influence in society, although group loyalties remained in some southern regions.

Tribalism is a stronger factor in the north, where the power of the state is concentrated among members of Saleh's Hashid tribe. The paramount Hashid sheikh was Abdullah Hussayn al-Ahmar, who died at the end of 2007. Prior to unification with the South, Sheikh al-Ahmar served as speaker of the parliament in Sanaa, a post which he resumed as head of the Islah party following the

1994 war. Before and after unification, the most influential northern military and security officers were men from Saleh's family or men from Hashid regions who owed their highest loyalty to Sheikh al-Ahmar. In the late 1990s it seemed that Saleh might build an effective system of patronage in the South based on renewed tribal influence there. But the southern tribal leaders who held the president's confidence soon became disillusioned with his regime. Instead of participating in Saleh's tribal politics, they united with other leading social figures in the South to press greater political demands in Sanaa.

In December 2001 a group of southern dignitaries met in Sanaa throughout the month of Ramadan. They included members of the Yemeni parliament; leaders of political parties, organizations, and tribes; and businessmen. The group—the “Public Forum for the Sons of the Southern and Eastern Provinces”—drafted a letter of complaint to Saleh listing popular grievances in their regions.⁵ Its chairman, Ali al-Qufaish, used his long friendship with the president to deliver the group's letter to Saleh's office, thus encouraging a private response. After one month without word, the chairman went public, publishing the group's letter in a widely read newspaper in hopes of forcing the president's hand. Saleh reacted severely, immediately directing government-run media to manufacture scandals about the Public Forum and its chairman. Key southern figures, including tribal sheikhs, understood that neither private nor public appeals would persuade the regime to change. Change would only come through organized opposition.

Saleh's reaction to the Public Forum was severe, but his grasp on power was weakening. Yemenis disapproved of his alliance with the United States following President Bush's declaration of a “war on terrorism.” In March 2003 tens of thousand of Yemenis marched on the U.S. embassy when the United States invaded Iraq, and Saleh used deadly force to stop them. Imams across Yemen heaped scorn on the president for standing with American aggression against a fellow Arab Muslim state. Saleh responded with an unprecedented move: ordering police to arrest preachers at mosques, including the Grand Mosque in old Sanaa. Followers of Sheikh al-Huthi's “Believing Youth” organization staged an armed rebellion in Sadah province. The Sadah rebels' success against the government's armed forces—even after their founder was killed in September 2004—inspired southerners, who sensed the time was ripe for mass opposition to the regime.

In May 2007 former southern military officers began holding weekly sit-ins in the streets of cities and towns.⁶ These officers had been forced into early retirement after the 1994 war. Their pensions were virtually worthless, so they demanded better compensation. The role of former southern military officers in creating the Southern Movement is significant because the officers symbolize South Yemen's loss of statehood in 1994, when the northern military occupied southern territory. Nasir Ali an-Nuba, leader of the coordinating council for southern military retirees, emphasized the need for peaceful, weapons-free

sit-ins. Fearing the spread of opposition, the regime ordered that an-Nuba be arrested along with a few of his colleagues. Protests grew: at first hundreds attended demonstrations, then thousands, and eventually tens of thousands.

A turning point came on the eve of the country's October 14 holiday, which commemorates the start of South Yemen's revolt against British rule in the 1960s. Security forces shot and killed four young men in the same streets where British colonial soldiers had killed seven Yemenis on October 14, 1963. This echo of violence and oppression from more revolutionary times ignited massive anti-government protests across the South, and Saleh was powerless to stop them. In December 2007 hundreds of thousands attended the long-delayed burial ceremony for the four men killed in October. The next month, security forces killed two protesters at an opposition rally in Aden. Less than four months later, government forces killed and injured dozens of southern youths rioting in two southern provinces.

By spring 2008 the anti-government protesters had no central leadership, but they began organizing around the name "Southern Movement," or the "Peace Movement of the South" (*al-Haraka al-Salmiyya lil-Junub*). Multiple groups directed their own local activities. The movement remains decentralized: as recently as January 2010, at least five similarly named organizations each claimed to represent the southern people. When the movement emerged, its senior members called for nonviolence to avoid armed clashes and, above all, to avoid being associated with the jihadists of al-Qaeda or the armed al-Huthi rebels in Sadah. Participants at early sit-ins held signs demanding "equal citizenship" and increased powers of local government. By the end of 2008, however, the movement had become radicalized, with protestors demanding "southern independence" and secession.

At rallies in 2009, demonstrators began waving the flag of the former South Yemen, which had not been used publicly since the 1994 war. In early April 2009 Sheikh Tareq al-Fadhli, a former southern ally of Saleh who assisted Saleh's GPC during its showdown with the YSP in the early 1990s, announced that he was joining the Southern Movement. The next month al-Qaeda's leader in Yemen, Nasser al-Wahayshi, declared AQAP's support for the Southern Movement. Al-Fadhli's announcement was more significant because he was quickly welcomed by leaders of the movement inside and outside the country, while the same leaders rejected any association with al-Wahayshi operating from his presumed base in the northern province of Marib. During the South's era of British colonial rule, al-Fadhli's father was an influential sultan. The sultan's family ruled extensive coastal lands east of Aden until all southern property was nationalized under Marxist rule in 1969. President Saleh claimed to restore these nationalized properties after the YSP's defeat in 1994, and the ruling GPC party staked its popularity in the south on a defense of traditional land-owning and business interests. Thus Tareq al-Fadhli's break with Saleh in 2009 indicated growing disillusionment among the regime's southern supporters.

In the early 1990s Sheikh Tareq al-Fadhli was very close to Saleh's inner circle. Al-Fadhli's sister married the regime's military strongman, General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar. More notably, Tareq al-Fadhli is one of the former Arab-Afgan *mujahideen* believed responsible for the assassinations that, with the regime's consent or support, preceded Yemen's first parliamentary election in 1993. Thus Sheikh al-Fadhli's joining the Southern Movement signaled more than a break with Saleh's regime. It also showed the potential reconciliation among southerners who had clashed during the past two decades because of old vendettas from the 1960s. Al-Fadhli now declares his support for an independent southern state led by former YSP leader Ali Salem al-Beidh, previously a villain to the *mujahideen* and traditional landholders among the old southern ruling class.⁷

President Saleh and other top Yemeni officials use Tareq al-Fadhli's support for the Southern Movement to spread fears about al-Qaeda safe havens in restless southern provinces. Al-Fadhli clearly changed the character of the Southern Movement, which grew more belligerent and militaristic after he joined the opposition leadership in 2009. In contrast to the movement's early nonviolent sit-ins, al-Fadhli appeared at public rallies in his hometown Zinjibar of Abyan province with a holstered pistol and heavily armed bodyguards. Questions about Sheikh al-Fadhli and the Southern Movement's relationship with al-Qaeda are more complicated. Leaders of the Southern Movement always reject being associated with al-Qaeda. For his part, al-Fadhli maintains that he fought in Afghanistan during the 1980s alongside local *mujahideen* leaders, not Osama bin Laden.⁸ In any case, al-Fadhli is suspected of helping bin Laden and al-Qaeda at a time when he was President Saleh's ally against the regime's opponents in the South. Inside Yemen's regime, General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar and other key northern figures have as many past ties to religious extremism and terrorism as al-Fadhli.

Whatever alliance Sheikh Tareq al-Fadhli enjoyed with Saleh's regime was shattered in July 2009, when government forces provoked a violent confrontation at the sheikh's home in Zinjibar, killing some of his bodyguards. In reality there are other, more powerful southern sheikhs who are also suspected of ties to al-Qaeda, and many of them support the Southern Movement. But the true problem in the South is not contacts between al-Qaeda and the Southern Movement. It is the unrest created by widespread opposition to the government in Sanaa. This unrest is rooted in Saleh's manipulation of divisions among the southern people and profiteering from southern economic resources. The Southern Movement is fueled by the perception that Saleh's family, which controls Yemen's military and security forces, is siphoning off revenues drawn from local petroleum resources—a significant problem because oil and gas account for roughly 90 percent of Yemen's exports and nearly three-quarters of government revenues.⁹

Dealing With the Southern Movement

The growing talk of secession by Southern Movement leaders raises concerns about Yemen's future and the stability of the Arabian peninsula. If the movement uses more violence in an attempt to secede, Yemen is more likely to become a failed state where extremist groups such as al-Qaeda can thrive. This is why the Southern Movement deserves serious attention by international actors.

The Southern Movement is much more than a security threat linked to al-Qaeda. It is first and foremost a political movement seeking redress for an unsuccessful unification process in the 1990s. Failure to address the underlying problems in the South could further jeopardize security. (Consider Iraq, where al-Qaeda became active only after the 2003 invasion destabilized the country and turned it into a recruiting ground for international terrorism.) Preventing the Southern Movement's transformation into a radical force with strong links to al-Qaeda will require addressing the scars from Yemen's unification and the political problems that fueled the movement's rise. The idea of Yemen as one nation with a shared history has problems: Southerners' experiences before unification were very different from those living in the North, and they remained different in significant ways after 1990. This lack of a unifying narrative makes it difficult to create national unity and bolsters southern opposition to the state. It is important to realize the greater social and political weight behind the Southern Movement because it represents grievances of people who, until very recently, controlled a large territory extending from the tip of the Arab peninsula to the border with Oman. Thus the Southern Movement presents a problem unlike other domestic opposition in the country, and it requires a political—not military or counterterrorism—solution.

Foreign policy makers must think outside the confines of counterterrorism strategy to avoid worsening the situation in Yemen. One of the joint U.S.-Yemeni air assaults in mid-December 2009 that targeted suspected al-Qaeda bases in southern Yemen killed large numbers of women and children in a small village of Mehfed district in Abyan province. Photos of the dead were published online and in newspapers, prompting angry street demonstrations. Southern Movement leaders were quick to reject any ties to al-Qaeda, but participants in the street demonstrations used the bombed village's name as a rallying cry. The United States and other concerned countries must not support Saleh in an expanded military campaign against the Southern Movement. They should push him to address the movement's political grievances, negotiate with southern leaders, address the problem of economic development, and begin the hard process of national reconciliation. Arab leaders should lead this process rather than Western leaders, because Western initiatives, particularly those with a military component, will automatically increase mistrust in the North and South, while raising support for al-Qaeda throughout the country.

The steps toward greater stability in Yemen are clear. Government must grow more transparent and less corrupt. Human rights must be respected, and political opposition must be allowed to organize peacefully. Political prisoners, including the hundreds arrested during street demonstrations in the South, must be released. The government's crackdown on the press must end. Hisham Bashraheel, publisher of the Adeni newspaper *al Ayyam*, was arrested January 4, 2010, after security forces stormed his house. He and dozens of other journalists need international support to gain their release.

The Sanaa government and representatives of the Southern Movement must open talks to arrive at national reconciliation. Exiled former YSP leaders—particularly Ali Salem al-Beidh, Haider al-Attas, and former southern president Ali Nasser Muhammad—should be part of this process because Yemen will remain unstable as long as so many exiled leaders are organizing opposition from beyond the nation's borders. Domestic political opponents must also be included in reconciliation efforts, including southern women who lost social standing after merging with the more conservative North. In 2001 an opposition female candidate named al-Jauhara nearly won the top post on Aden's provincial council. She should be consulted, as should the city's many female professionals like the accomplished lawyer Raqiya Hamaidan.

The reconciliation effort also should include the exiled southern business community and the former southern ruling class. Yemen's economy needs help from successful southern businessmen who prospered in other countries. Prior to the 1994 war, Hadramaut's economy was booming as families who had lived in exile before unification returned, driving up property values. But their plans shifted as the country headed toward conflict. Political processes in the South need to be more inclusive, so southern goals are best served by forming a council of leaders, including former exiles, committed to improving conditions there. That council's work must always be conducted within the framework of a united Yemen, not as a plan for secession. Yet the future structure of the Yemeni state should be open to negotiation during the national reconciliation process.

The Yemeni state is more likely to survive if power devolves from the central government, perhaps in a federal or even confederal system. All international organizations providing aid to Yemen—the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, United States Agency for International Development, and the UK's Department For International Development—have talked about the need for decentralization, but government resistance to the idea has meant little improvement. In the past year, President Saleh has promised to deepen the process of decentralization by allowing “directly elected local government with broad political powers,” a formulation earlier used by the Southern Movement. The international community should seize this opportunity to encourage him to widen the power structure, and it should encourage southern leaders now talking of independence to tone down their rhetoric.

Saleh is one of the Arab world's longest-serving leaders; only the Sultan of Oman and Libya's Colonel Muammar Qaddafi have been in power longer. He must reiterate that he will keep his pledge to leave office when his term ends in 2013, and he must end speculation that he intends to transfer power to someone in his family. (Saleh's son, Ahmed, and three cousins are reportedly being groomed for leadership in the military.) If Saleh were to step down as part of renegotiating Yemen's government structure, and refuse to install a member of his family in his place, it could convince the Southern Movement to drop its secessionist plans.

Such steps will not be easy. There will be resistance by the regime, but also by the most radical elements in the Southern Movement. Complicating matters, the attempt to settle the southern problem by political means will become entangled with ongoing security operations against al-Qaeda and the Huthi rebellion. The success of the political effort in the South will require steady, outside pressure and effective mediation, preferably by an Arab leader like Jordan's late King Hussein, who tried to assist Yemenis in 1994. Ultimately, the success of such an effort will depend on Yemeni leaders on all sides, and their willingness to tackle problems left unsolved since the 1990s.

Notes

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- 2 Abdulaziz Sultan al-Mansoub, *The 1993 Parliamentary Elections in Yemen* (Arabic), Sanaa, Yemen 1995.
- 3 Stephen Day, “Power-Sharing and Hegemony,” Ph.D. Dissertation, UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, MI, 2001; pp. 379–384. This information will also appear in a forthcoming book by the author, *Yemen Redivided: Twenty Years of Unity Politics in the Era of al-Qaeda*.
- 4 Victoria Clark, *Dancing on the Heads of Snakes*, Yale University Press, forthcoming.
- 5 Interview conducted by the author with the Public Forum’s director at his home in Sanaa, July 2002.
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- 7 “Interview: Al-Fadhli Affirms His Blessings for Ali Salem al-Beidh,” *al-Wasat*, May 13, 2009. “Al-Fadhli: The issue is not Yemen’s unity for which we paid with our blood, but the South and its well-being,” *al-Ayyam*, April 2, 2009. <http://www.al-ayyam.info/default.aspx?NewsID=b539f0d3-4903-4b96-80bd-1299c3f9059a>.
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- 9 World Bank, “Country Brief: Yemen,” World Bank, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTYEMEN/Resources/YEMEN-ENG2009AM.pdf>.

Chronology of Key Events in the Modern History of South Yemen

1839	Britain first occupies the port city of Aden.
1904	Ottoman-British borderline drawn, separating the Ottoman North from South Yemen, where the British sign protection treaties with many sheikhs and sultans in regions surrounding Aden colony.
1959	British declare Federation of South Arabian Emirates around Aden colony, and push a wider federal scheme in the early 1960s as part of their plan to leave the South.
1963	Start of South Yemen's revolution; guerrilla warfare is used to expel British forces.
1967	South Yemen wins national independence from Britain.
1969	Marxists form the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, nationalizing property in the South and prompting the old ruling class to flee into exile.
1972	First border war with North Yemen.
1979	Second border war with North Yemen.
1981	Draft unity constitution signed with North Yemen.
1984	First oil discovered in Yemen on northern side of the border, creating incentives for joint exploration and further talks of unity.
1986	Violent intra-regime battle in Aden among factions of Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) formed in the late 1970s. President Ali Nasser Muhammad is overthrown and flees country with thousands of refugees, dimming the prospects of unity with the North.
1990	North and South unify, creating the Republic of Yemen. North Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh becomes the new country's president; Ali Salem al-Beidh, general secretary of the YSP, becomes vice president. Other southern YSP members hold equal share of cabinet seats with northern colleagues.
1993	The unified Yemen conducts its first national parliamentary election. Al-Beidh leads YSP to a third-place finish, then attempts to restructure the country along federal lines with the YSP maintaining regional autonomy in the South.

1994	Jordanian-brokered Document of Pledge and Accord (DPA) followed by North-South civil war exactly one year after Yemen's first national parliamentary election. Saleh's northern forces triumph.
2001	President Saleh permits Yemen's first local elections, but these do not satisfy southern citizens, who demand more democratic rights. In late 2001 a group of prominent figures forms the "Public Forum for the Sons of the Southern and Eastern Provinces" in an attempt to press the president to resolve regional grievances.
2007	Southern Movement begins peaceful protests after retired army officers hold sit-ins.
2008	Rising violence in southern provinces as the regime seeks to repress the Southern Movement; Saleh allows indirect election of provincial governors, but this fails to end the protests.
2009	The leader of al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula declares support for the Southern Movement and the goal of an independent southern Islamic state. A prominent former member of the Arab-Afghan <i>mujahideen</i> and son of a former southern sultan joins the Southern Movement's leadership. Clashes between government and opposition grow more violent.

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