

South Yemen Update

Dream no small dreams for they do not have the power to move the hearts of men

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New leadership, New Paths for Opportunities Across South Yemen

Eight years into the devastating civil war in Yemen, the country has lost a number of high-profile leaders. The impact of the war on the leadership also paved the way for the fracturing of state institutions, particularly in southern Yemen. The vacuum created by the significant shifts of power might have restructured political relations in northern Yemen while creating opportunities across the South to rebalance the injustice of history.

The fall of major figures over the past eight years has given rise to new faces as centers of gravity. The shifts within the elite structure open space for junior figures previously found at the margins. The case of Maj. Gen. Aidarous Qasim Abd al-Aziz al-Zubaidi, as a co-founder of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in 2017, remains a particular case among these new figures. The fall and rise of leaders have directly impacted the course of the eight-year conflict. New faces have also reinvigorated the spirit of hope for otherwise moribund aspirations in the South. New figures at the helm in southern Yemen have unified the ranks among civilians and security forces, delivering a more cohesive leadership under a new banner directly involved at the national level.

Ascending leadership

The rise of an actor like Aidarous al-Zubaidi is often not accidental. The General, now president of the STC and commander of the Joint Southern Forces, has come a long way from his upbringing in the village of Zubaid in the al-Dhale province in the period of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). His political and military leadership role since the liberation of Aden in July 2015 has been a product of military experience and leadership within the southern resistance.

General Zubaidi, born on 23 July 1967, moved to Aden following primary and secondary schooling in his village. He joined the Air Force College in 1986, a time of political turmoil in southern Yemen, graduating two years later with the rank of second lieutenant. Following Unification in May 1990, Zubaidi moved to Sana'a, where he became security commander in the Embassy Security Unit within the Ministry of Interior. Staying loyal to the South, al-Zubaidi sided with then Vice-President Ali Salem al-Baydh in the secessionist war of 1994. Following the defeat of the southern secessionist forces, like many other southerners, al-Zubaidi fled Yemen to Djibouti until 1996.

While he participated in the Civil War of 1994, his experience in the resistance movement began in 1996. In Djibouti, al-Zubaidi helped establish the Hatem (Self-Determination) Movement, a southern armed resistance group formed to

carry out covert attacks on military posts of the forces "occupying the south." This came at a time when southerners adopted the narratives against northern occupation following the defeat in 1994 and a crackdown by Sana'a against those advancing southern self-determination and a return of the southern state. In 1997, Maj. Gen. al-Zubaidi was tried in absentia by a Sana'a military tribunal and sentenced to death along with other southern officers.



President of the STC Aidarous Al-Zubaidi

Shifting narratives

Since 1994, southern activists were split between peaceful civil disobedience and armed resistance in their approach to what they saw as a state under occupation. Southerners agreed on the primary goal to attract attention among the international community and focus on crimes committed by the Sana'a regime and the right to self-determination within the framework of invalidating the unification of 1990. Southerners did remain split on the specific path to resistance.

The divide between Southern groups from 1994 to 2007 obstructed progress on Southern ambitions. Nevertheless, the emergence of HIRAK, the Southern Peaceful Movement, in protest to the increased marginalization of Southerners in civil service jobs and the military, reinvigorated the resistance. This revival coincided with the war in Sadah between the Sana'a government and Zaydi Shia Houthis rebels. HIRAK unified southern political figures within and beyond Yemen's borders. The movement attracted a new generation of young activists grabbing hold of the narratives against northern occupation and demands for self-determination. Young Southerners reached back to a country most did not experience but longed for as a consequence of marginalization within unified Yemen.

The sentiment grew among the youth as the Arab Spring reached Yemen in February 2011. While armed conflict erupted across northern Yemen between pro-Saleh forces and elements aligned with Yemen's Muslim Brotherhood affiliate al-Islah, southerners organized sit-ins in Aden and peaceful protests across southern provinces. As Sana'a authorities ordered "crackdowns on demonstrators in Aden," political groups and the general population refrained from organizing an armed uprising similar to the course of events in Amran, Mareb, or Taiz. A segment of the population across the South demanded that leaders meet Northern aggression with force. Leaders like al-Zubaidi were prepared, with hundreds of trained men and light weapons, but restraint was the order from the central leadership in Hiraq. Leaders wanted the world to see the heavy-handed approach taken by Sana'a authorities, which continued following the transfer of power from Saleh to Hadi in February 2012. Unarmed civilian protesters were met with force by security forces then under the authority of a president of southern origin. Hadi is originally from Abyan province.

Escalation and response

The new war between the Houthis and the Sana'a government reached Aden in March 2015. The Houthi march south represented both an existential threat and a long-awaited opportunity for southern leaders. Survival of the southern cause now demanded a multi-prong response, including armed resistance.

The approach taken since 2007 was no longer adequate; the new enemy once again came to 'conquer' the South. Houthi rebels were not only chasing President Hadi and removing Islah affiliates in Aden but their aggression was also aimed at submitting Southerners to their grip on power. This was a time for leaders like Aidarous al-Zubaidi to step to the forefront of the Southern resistance and shape its path.

Al-Zubaidi was in the perfect position in command of hundreds of well-trained men, and through long-standing relations with the UAE, cemented by allies from Yafa living in the UAE, al-Zubaidi secured military assistance from the Arab Coalition. First, elements aligned with the Hatem Movement pushed Houthi fighters out of central al-Dhale province toward borders with al-Baydha and Ibb provinces. His forces then participated in the liberation of Yemen's largest air base at al-Anad in Lahj. Forces under General al-Zubaidi and his allies were among the most effective against northern forces. The liberation of Aden in July 2015 was facilitated by organized militia on the fringes and enough weapons and vehicles provided by the Saudi Arabia-led coalition. The forces under al-Zubaidi and other southern leaders then organized against terrorist elements from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State in Yemen (IS-Y). A year of counter-terrorism operations cleared Aden of AQAP and ISIS elements.

Al-Zubaidi served nearly a year and a half as governor of Aden before being fired by President Hadi in April 2017. Once again, al-Zubaidi seized an opportunity; he gathered a wide range of allies from across the eight southern provinces and announced the twenty-six-member Southern Transitional Council (STC) in May. Later that year, the STC formed a 303-member National Assembly and offices across the South. This new approach led by Aidarous al-Zubaidi strengthened his profile and placed the southern forces as a new emerging center of power in Yemen. The STC has managed to unify a highly diverse group of Southerners who now rally behind a common narrative, especially after several significant military victories in Abyan, Aden, and Shebwa. As influence increased and pro-STC forces gained control on the ground, Aidarous al-Zubaidi gained recognition among Western governments and the Saudi Arabia-led coalition in particular. In a surprising move during a gathering of Yemeni officials and political activists, President Hadi stepped down in April 2022. This paved the way for the establishment of a new eight-member Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), with Aidarous al-Zubaidi representing the South. This position has placed southern grievances at the center of Yemen politics. Southerners are once again united under one leadership, raising hope of a new beginning and a more equitable distribution of resources in months and years to come.

In a strong show of forces early this year, under the direction of President Aidarous al-Zubaidi, southern forces launched Operation East Arrows. The counter-terrorism operation targeting al-Qaeda across northern Abyan province was a clear message by the head of the STC against elements threatening stability across the South. Success delivered increasing leverage within the PLC and in relations with members of the Saudi Arabia-led Coalition. The military success in Abyan was built upon gains from victories against Houthis in Bayhan, Shebwa, and southeastern Mareb in 2022. The shift in approach toward advancing southern interests has been clear under the leadership of Aidarous al-Zubaidi since the establishment of the STC. It remains to be seen how the STC maneuvers through recent developments since the visit by Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed Al Jaber, to Sana'a for talks with Houthi rebels. Continued success under Zubeidi's leadership has built growing trust among Southerners; sustaining the gains will prove a greater challenge in months to come.



Fernando Carvajal served on the UN Security Council Panel of Experts of Yemen from April 2017 to March 2019 as an armed groups and regional expert. He has nearly 20 years of experience conducting fieldwork in Yemen and is a specialist in Yemeni politics and tribal relations.

Terrorist Activity in Yemen

An al-Qaida attack in Abyan, South Yemen on Thursday 10 August, killed a military commander and three soldiers from the STC security belt adding to the number of Southern leaders targeted by the extremist group. The Commander assassinated killed is Abd al-Latif al-Sayyid and the three soldiers from the Security Belt. He was known to a tough commander in charge of rooting out terrorist elements from the province. The commander assassinated is considered a big loss for the STC and for the Southern forces in the security belt.

danger to our determination to build our Southern state and a danger to the region and the international community. We need to join our forces and resources together to positively deal with these terrorist and remove this danger once AND FOR ALL. Yahia went on to say, it's worth noting that the existence of AQAP and other terrorist and extremist groups stretches back to the failed unity project in 1990 and the Yemeni war in 1994 much further than the current conflict, with its roots developing decades earlier.



Dr Yehiya Shaif Chair of STC Coordinating Commity the University of Aden

Coverage of al-Qaeda in Yemen has always disproportionately focused on the threat that al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) poses to the West, while ignoring the plight of the local population in areas under its control. However, southern Yemen's complicated history led to the development and strengthening of AQAP, and has turned the country's southern population into the primary victims of suppression and terror.

AQAP—arguably the most powerful branch of al-Qaeda use a large portion of southern Yemeni territory seized following the protracted conflicts in Yemen. and immediately following the Houthi invasion of the country as its main base. A few years later, it further secured its position during the instability in the south caused by Yemen's most recent conflict with the Houthis.

However, Dr Yahiya Shaif, chair of the STC Aden University coordinating committee and a leading southern intellectual explains in a recent interview that the targeting of southern forces in Abyan, particularly of our influential military leader's demonstrates that AQAP are coordinating their attacks with a high level of sophistication and coordination with enemy forces inside and outside the country with an ability militarily to coordinate their attacks against our military command. Furthermore, he explained that the STC is resilient and determined to get rid of this cancer disease once and for all. He said that the presence of such an extremist group operating in southern territory is a

furthermore, Dr Yahiya emphasises the issue of terrorism in the south had huge implications for the region and the international community and the stability of this important location in the world and the fluidity of international trade can only be achieved by stability in South Yemen. He said it is time for cooperation and coordination between our regional partners, the international community and the STC to rid the south of this cancerous disease.



Martyr Abdul-Latif Al-Sayyid

In 1990, the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) united with the northern Yemen Arab Republic to form a unified Yemen. While in theory the unification was meant to be symbolic of a more peaceful future for Yemen after decades of tension and conflict between the two states, in reality the relationship between the northern and southern parts of the country remained rocky, with tensions erupting again in 1994.

It was during this time period that "returning Afghan Arabs,"—as they were widely known—were used by the Northern regime in the south as a useful tool against southern resistance, with some sections of this group later developing into AQAP.

These extremists proved to be an effective fighting machine that were decisive in the defeat of southern forces in the 1994 war.

The SCT leadership recently announced that it intends to rid the south-western province of Abyan and every inch of southern territory of what it calls terrorist groups. In the south of the country, al-Qaida militants have repeatedly attacked STC armed and security forces.

UK Political Thinking on Yemen

When it comes to what South Yemen can expect from Western countries, there are of course limits to what can be achieved. The UK's political leadership is a good example; they offer very little of the visionary thinking that would be required to lead a change of the status quo in Yemen. Both conservatives and labour have similar positions with no political appetite to think through the possibility of a two state solution to end the Yemeni crisis.

Up to now, the UK has engaged with Yemen primarily through security training and cooperation, and on developmental and humanitarian support. But even the development aid is at risk due to a reduction in the aid budget.

As the UN Security Council penholder on Yemen, it conceivably takes the lead in coordinating wider political initiatives. But on the ground it is money and investment from the Middle East that holds sway. In this context the Yemeni file is seen by politicians as the responsibility of the Arab coalition led by the kingdom of Saudia Arabia. Western countries and the way their policy is shaped seems more and more beset by short-termism and their national interest. Their inability to see their long term interest highlights well the absurdities of UK foreign policy on this issue.



Abdul Galil Shaif
Author of history of South Yemen

The UK position of shifting the responsibility of the Yemeni file to Gulf states is equally indefensible. It may be driven by an impulse to divest Britain of any perceived colonial pretensions, but it does not come across as empowering. Rather it's viewed as a timid abdication of responsibility from a government ready to play the part of global leader and former benevolent empire when it suits it.



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