

How did the War in Yemen Impact the Southern Movement?

Ahmed Nagi

The consequences of the ongoing war in Yemen is increasingly leaving a huge impact on the southern issue. While it is creating decentralization for the southern parties to govern most of the southern governorates, it is producing several barriers and challenges for a unified southern vision. Today, the big issue in the south is not the south versus north narrative or the north's marginalization of the southern areas. The biggest challenge is southern-southern politics. Will they be able to maintain the integrity of their southern cause in the midst of the war's implications and exclusion policies? What is the vision for a political settlement for the south in the post conflict Yemen?

The advance of Ansar Allah movement, known as Houthis, [towards the southern city of Aden](#) spurred [the military intervention of the Saudi-led coalition](#) in Yemen. The coalition announced an operation in March 2015 to defeat the Houthis-Saleh alliance and restore the legitimate government after the Houthis conducted a military coup and took over Yemen's capital, Sana'a. Since then, the conflict dynamics reinforced the southern movement and empowered some southern factions to de facto govern across the southern governorates. Yet these shifting dynamics brought a set of barriers and challenges within the southern camp that include deepening political and military divisions; creating differences over the future of the south; and bringing back the barriers that resembled the southern state during the pre-unification era.

The first challenge is the representation problem. Who is the legal representative of the south? This key question has created differences among the southern factions and the issue not new to the southern camp. It has existed since [the 1994 Civil War](#), when former president Ali Abdullah Saleh defeated the separatists after almost two months of fight. Nevertheless, the ongoing war made the question more apparent as the southern movement transformed from political struggle to holding arms. In the past two decades, [dozens of the southern entities](#) inside and outside Yemen demanding to restore the southern state or some sort of autonomy for the southern regions. Most of those entities sought their credibility pursued one of the following routes. They either brought in members and activists from the southern governorates to show inclusivity in their representation; attracted key influential southern leaders who were part of the southern state to show their links with the southern political establishment; or third, adopting the prevailing demands that have some sort of a consensus among the southern communities. It was common to see each southern faction have its influential figures and demands list, but that does not resolve the representation issue. On the contrary, it creates more differences among the southern parties. This has ironically made competition over representation a key contentious issue among southern factions as opposed to fighting over ideas or the political vision of the southern movement.

The militarization of the southern groups brought about by the conflict gave the newly formed groups to claim legitimacy. These groups are using crowds and marches that some southern factions count on to express their popular support for their agendas. For instance, [the Southern Transitional Council \(STC\)](#) established in May 2017 derived its legitimacy from what is called [Aden's Historic Statement](#) issued by crowds in April 2017. This crowd has fueled the STC's rhetoric, portraying the STC is the only representative of the south. Possessing military and security forces is another component that the STC used in maintaining its de facto representation of mass southern crowds. The southern groups and figures who later became part of the STC were the party controlling Aden and the surrounding areas. Another example is [the Southern National Coalition \(SNC\)](#), which was founded in 2018 and likewise used the crowds and rallies technique. Although the SNC does not directly possess military forces, the presence of supporting security commanders within the governmental forces has made it an entity with a foothold in many southern governorates. The same approach used by other groups, whose demands are autonomy for their region such as the [Inclusive Hadramout Conference](#) founded in 2017.

The issue of representation in the South cannot be separated from the historical conflict between the Socialist party's wings. A conflict that shaped the southern state, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, during its reign (1967-1990), culminating in the bloody January 1986 confrontations. The legacy of the southern-southern disputes remains present in today's southern politics. For instance, the majority of STC's commanders descend from south-western governorates (Lahij and Dhali) while southern commanders from Shabwa and Abyan are part of other southern entities. This conflicts with the STC's narrative that its leaders come from all southern governorates.

The second challenge emerged in the past seven years is the growing militarization that is coinciding with lesser political dialogue among the southern factions. The war against Houthi militias was clearly reflected in the southern movement. The large number of the military and security forces are controlling the southern governorates. Even the forces that are under the internationally recognized government managed mostly by the southern military leaders. Most of the fights took place in the south in the past years were between these forces. Currently, the STC is controlling Aden, Lahij and Dhali, while the Hadrami Elite Forces and the Hadrami Battalions are holding the situation by the Hadramawt coast. In addition, the Shabwa Defence Forces and the Giants' Brigades are controlling Shabwa. Although all these forces are totally from South, there is no active southern-southern political dialogue to unify their political vision.

The political dialogue among the southern factions was present in the pre-war time, especially during 2011-2014. Many conferences and meetings held to discuss a unified vision to resolve the southern issue. However, the southern-armed groups that emerged showed a tendency to be part of such political dialogue. With the exception of STCs' calls to communicate with other southern groups to convince them with its vision, these efforts remain nominal. [The STC is aiming to win the allegiances](#) of Southern leaders and not to provide a unified political vision that gives clear answers to key political issues in the South's regions. Most importantly, the design of many southern groups are associated with personalities more than a clear project. This applies to Aidros al-Zubaidi head of the STC, Ahmed al-Issei of the SNC, and Hassan Baoum of the Supreme Council of the Southern Movement, among other parties.

The third challenge is the negative impact of the separation rhetoric on the southern regions. According to the southern movement, the key demand of the south is "secession," "independence," or "disengagement" from the north. It is based on the question of the right of peoples to self-determination and non-forcible imposition of unity. However, this speech brought a challenge of another kind. Many southern regions were not part of the southern State in the pre-independence phase of 1967. Most of the southern areas were sultanates and shajhdoms with autonomy like Hadramout, Shabwa, and Mahra among others. Their accession under the framework of a unified state was achieved forcibly through The National Liberation Front's military efforts. Today, the separation narrative actively recounts sub-identities in the southern governorates. This has encouraged a region like Hadramout to demand something similar: right to self-determination and disengage from the South and North.

The fourth challenge is the growing influence of the regional actors in the south. It is obvious that the Saudi-led coalition military intervention is boosting the southern cause, making it more present militarily comparing to the past years. But it redirected it to be a card put to use by external actors when their interests require it. There is a demonstrable role for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Saudi Arabia in shaping the southern leadership. The different agendas of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are highly manifested in southern local politics. Each country has its own southern factions, through which they implement their goals on the ground. Moreover, some of the military forces in the south are not part of the southern political movement and belong directly to the regional actors such as the Giants Brigades Forces, the Salefi fighters who are becoming the most powerful forces in the south. On the other side, the Mahri tribal movement is strongly liked by the Omani side, who views active regional presence a threat to its border security. The dominance of the regional actors over the southern cause is transforming the cause from its local context to becoming an issue in the hands of the external powers.

The implications of the current conflict in Yemen are re-shaping the future of the southern cause. Owning more militarized forces alone within the southern groups is not going to bring back the southern state. If there is no serious political vision among the southern parties, the military power will turn to be a burden on the southern cause. In addition, disengaging the southern cause from the regional agenda is an important step that saves the cause from any sort of exploitation. More importantly, 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.

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