

Policy Briefs

Declaration of Autonomy: The Gradual Erosion of Authority in South Yemen

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The unilateral declaration of autonomy by the Yemeni Southern Transitional Council (STC) on 25 April 2020 did not arise from a vacuum. It was a product of various intersecting contexts and interests in Yemen, growing out of the long-standing conflict between north and south Yemen, southern rivalries and factionalism, and the competing aspirations of regional actors in the Yemeni war, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Although the STC soon backtracked and recommitted to the political power-sharing arrangement laid out in the Riyadh Agreement in late 2019, the timing of its declaration sheds light on the current balance of power in south Yemen, the possible trajectory of the wider conflict in the country, and the future of southern autonomy.

Taking the immediate context, the declaration was apparently precipitated by the recent defeats of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's forces in northern Yemen in February and March. With government forces in disarray, the STC and its regional backer, the United Arab Emirates, seized the chance to advance their own interests. For the STC, it offered an opportunity to re-take key southern provinces from the Hadi government and strengthen its position as the prime representative of the south. This dovetailed with its patron's strategic interests in the country and its long-standing efforts to cultivate influence and gain a firm foothold in Yemen.

While KSA and UAE are united in their military coalition against the Houthis, ostensibly on behalf of the legitimate Hadi government, each country has its own interests, and as the war wears on, their interests have increasingly diverged. The UAE is less interested in repelling the Houthis than in furthering its strategic priorities: gaining control of ports, especially Aden, and securing a military presence on the eastern bank of the Red Sea, which would bolster its military bases on the other side of the waterway in Eritrea. These two objectives advance its longer-term ambition of becoming the main US partner in the Middle East and dominating the region's energy supplies.

These goals have set the UAE at odds with its coalition partner, but Saudi Arabia has thus far avoided a direct clash with the UAE to ensure the latter's continued participation in the military coalition and Emirati efforts to control Houthi arms smuggling along the coast. It also has its eye on the southern governorate of al-Mahrah, where it has long sought to build an oil port that would provide an alternative to the Iran-controlled Hormuz Straits. The STC declaration, however, could change the calculus. Demonstrating that UAE holds more influence in south Yemen and further undermining the Hadi government, the unilateral move toward autonomy could lead to the unraveling of the Arab coalition and may encourage Iran and the Houthis to intensify their offensive against Saudi Arabia. Alternatively, it might lead to a new Saudi-Emirati understanding on south Yemen, but one in which the UAE has the clear upper hand.

In light of these competing interests and calculations, the situation in south Yemen could unfold along various trajectories, but the determining factor will be the extent to which the STC takes its commitment to the Riyadh Agreement seriously. One scenario is that the STC refuses to do so and seeks to enforce unilateral southern secession with military action, but this move has little chance for success. Factionalism and local rivalries within the south are too strong and it would likely spur a prolonged civil war, which would in turn prove conducive to meddling by other regional powers like Iran and Russia, especially if the Saudi-led coalition fragments.

In a second scenario, the Hadi government could launch a military offensive to re-take Aden and STC-controlled governorates, but this is unlikely. Such an action would probably not receive the green light from Saudi Arabia absent a direct clash between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

The most likely scenario is that the Riyadh Agreement holds, despite breaches by various parties. Formally adhering to the agreement would give the STC room to maneuver, allowing it to light small fires to slowly erode the authority of the Hadi government in the south, while enjoying political legitimacy under the agreement and avoiding open conflict with Saudi Arabia. This option is the most preferable for KSA as well, for it would give Riyadh a role, meager as it may be, in the formation of any future governments in Yemen, particularly if a power-sharing agreement is reached with the Houthis to end the war.

*This is a summary of a policy brief originally written in Arabic, available here: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/article/4666>

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