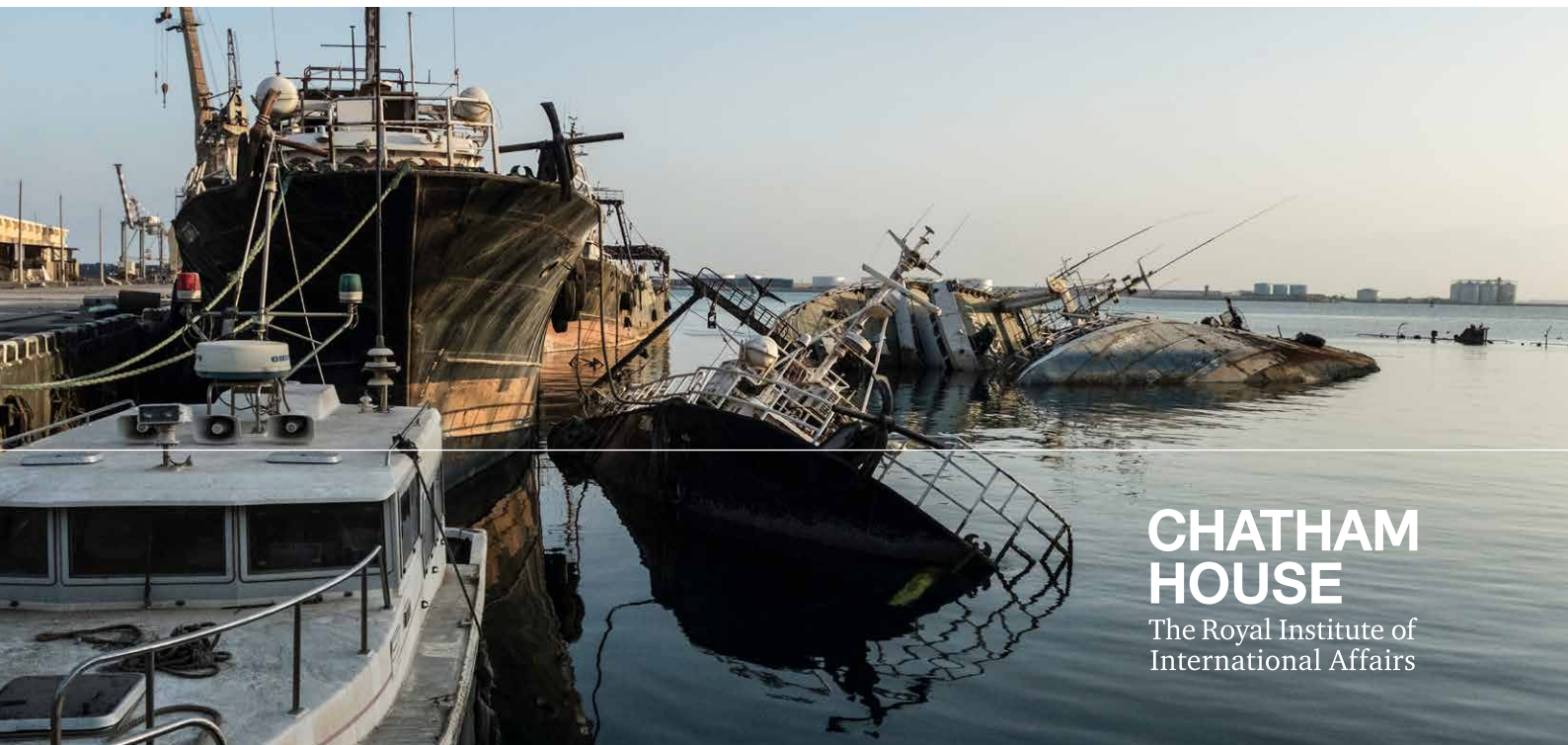


Research Paper

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Middle East and North Africa Programme | March 2018

Yemen's Southern Powder Keg



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Contents

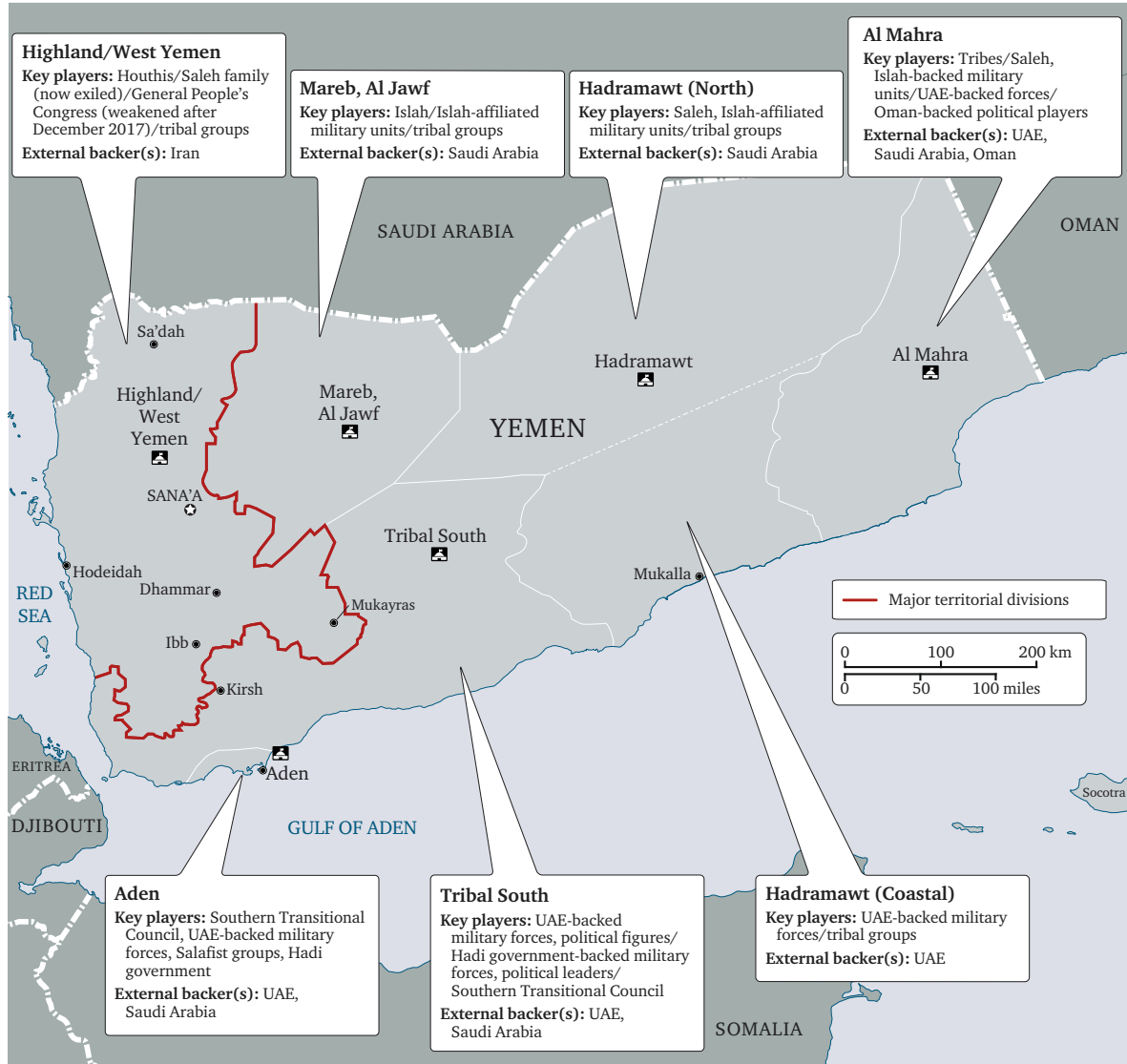
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Summary

- After three years of civil war, Yemen has become a 'chaos state'. It more closely resembles a region of mini-states – beset by a complex range of internal politics and disputes – at varying degrees of conflict with one another, than a single state engaged in a binary war.
- An unintended consequence of the conflict is that the south of the country is rapidly moving towards outright autonomy. Southern Yemen has a long history of agitation for independence. Historically, political elites and foreign officials believed that the 'southern question' could be deferred indefinitely because of a lack of cohesion or strategy among secessionist groups.
- Although not entirely unified, pro-independence groups have become much more organized and heavily armed. Recent fighting in Aden between secessionist and pro-government forces demonstrated the relative power and cohesion of the pro-independence movement; and the potential for the southern issue, if left unaddressed, to further complicate efforts to end the ongoing Yemen civil war.
- In a reversal of a quarter of a century of increasingly centralized control from Sana'a, Yemen's capital, southern governorates now have their own evolving military, police and security infrastructures, largely drawn from the local population. An emerging political leadership has been able to organize itself more coherently than past iterations of the secessionist movement.
- In the past, southern secessionist groups struggled because of the lack of external backers. The support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for key players has been crucial to their recent evolution, and many southerners now believe that it supports their push for independence, though it denies this.
- The UAE's agenda is not entirely clear. Several factors – including its role in the Saudi-led coalition that has intervened in the country, its antipathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, and its broader national and regional priorities – are likely to take precedence over the ambitions of Yemen's southerners.
- The south's current trajectory may lead to an attempt at independence or autonomy. If a breakaway effort were to occur before the end of the civil war, it would undermine the UN-led peace process. If an attempt happens once a ceasefire has been agreed, it could spark renewed conflict. Even without an outright declaration of independence, the potential for conflict with the internationally recognized government in contested southern areas – Aden, Shabwa and Hadramawt – remains high.
- Southern groups will play an important role in deciding Yemen's future security, stability and territorial integrity. Yet international policymakers have paid little attention to the south since the civil war began, in keeping with a historical tendency of seeing the region as a second-tier issue. As a consequence, southern groups are not formally included in the peace process.

- In order to foster security and stability in Yemen, and prevent a further deterioration of the relationship with the government, policymakers will have to develop a deeper understanding of the south, improve communication with southern leaders and work to build the capacity of southern civil society – as it will need to in the rest of the country.
- The appointment of a new UN special envoy, at a time when the broader conflict appears to be stagnating, has created an opportunity for a new international approach to mediation in Yemen in general, and to the southern issue in particular.
- The so-called 'southern question' can no longer be deferred if the mistakes of the 2012–14 transition are to be avoided. At that time, the Houthis, with the support of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, were able to march south to Sana'a because they were not seen as being a credible threat to the political process. In fact, the Houthi takeover of Sana'a sparked the current war, and the group now controls much of Yemen's northern highlands and western seaboard.

Map 1: Yemen's chaos state – structural divisions



1. Introduction

The three-year Yemeni civil war has caused fundamental shifts in political power, after decades of centralized rule by the regime in the capital Sana'a. New and evolving 'facts on the ground' are likely to define its politics and governance for decades to come.¹

Yemen has become a 'chaos state' – a territory in which the central state has either collapsed or lost control of large segments of the territory over which it is nominally sovereign, and where a political economy has emerged in which groups with varying degrees of legitimacy cooperate and compete with one another.² While from the outside such places appear to be chaotic, in a state of general disorder, they contain economies and political ecosystems, which in turn have an internal order and logic of their own.

Yemen is in the midst of a period of profound and lasting change, having experienced shifts in power and territorial control that are unlikely to be reversed by any political agreement. Civil wars do not just destroy local infrastructure, state institutions or political orders; they also 'contribute to shaping and producing them'.³ To understand what the Yemen of tomorrow might look like, one must try to understand how it is being changed by the civil war of today.

Nowhere is this change more evident and more important than in the so-called 'south'⁴ of Yemen: the eight governorates that made up the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) before it merged with the northern Yemen Arab Republic in 1990.⁵ Aspirations towards southern self-rule have risen significantly following the liberation of most of the southern territory from the now defunct Houthi–Saleh alliance in 2015.⁶ Yet the situation in the south remains one of the least analysed aspects of the conflict and a worrying policy vacuum exists around the 'southern question'. Yemeni elites and foreign officials were able to ignore this question in the past, but deferral is no longer an option, even with the conflict placing a strain on under-resourced peacebuilding and foreign policy establishments engaged in Yemen. The south is a 'powder keg', in the words of one seasoned observer, waiting to explode.⁷

Since the civil war began in 2015, the south has become largely autonomous from the rest of the country. Secessionist groups have become more organized and much more heavily armed. Support from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for key security, military and political bodies has led many southerners to believe that independence could be within reach.

¹ For a more detailed overview of shifts in the balance of power across Yemen as a whole, see Salisbury, P. (2017), *Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2017-12-20-yemen-national-chaos-local-order-salisbury2.pdf>.

² Ibid.

³ Péclard, D. and Mechoulan, D. (2015), *Rebel Governance and the Politics of Civil War*, working paper, Swisspeace, http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Media/Publications/WP_1_2015.pdf.

⁴ Yemen's 'south' is in fact made up of its southern and easternmost governorates. The term is used here as it is the common naming convention for this territory in Yemen.

⁵ They are Abyan, Aden, Al Dhale, Al Mahra, Hadramawt, Lahj, Shabwa and Socotra. Al Dhale, which was not a governorate under the PDRY, was formed from a merger of northern and southern territory after unification. Until 2014, when it was made a governorate in its own right, Socotra was part of Al Mahra governorate.

⁶ Author's interview in Amman, October 2017.

⁷ Author's interview via telephone, October 2017.

A rush towards independence before a political settlement to end the wider war would deepen the complexity of the conflict and could potentially derail the current UN-led peace process. In addition, fissures between key southern groups could also lead to further conflict within the south.

UAE-backed southern groups are not monolithic, and do not have a monopoly over violence. Tensions between forces loyal to President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and the armed groups and political actors backed by the UAE have already had a debilitating effect on stability in the south and on the Saudi coalition-led anti-Houthi war effort more generally. Clashes between Hadi loyalists and affiliates of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Aden, Yemen's temporary capital for the past three years, in January 2018, underlined the fragility of the situation, which threatens to become a war within a war with repercussions for the wider conflict. Furthermore, relations between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, the principal players in the Saudi-led military coalition that supports anti-Houthi forces across Yemen, could be damaged by further intra-Yemeni fighting in the south.

Residents of Hadramawt governorate are fearful that conflict could break out between UAE-backed forces in the southern part of the governorate and military units variously backed by Hadi and others, including Islah in the northern part. Observers are similarly concerned over the potential for Hadi and Islah military units stationed in Mareb and the north of Shabwa governorate to come into conflict with the UAE-backed Shabwani Elite Forces operating across the governorate.

Southern groups will play an important role, for better or for worse, in deciding Yemen's future security, stability and territorial integrity.

The discordant agendas of outside powers are a prominent and problematic feature of the wider conflict. The UAE entered the Yemen war as actively as it did, in part, in the hope of strengthening its evolving alliance with Saudi Arabia. Yet Abu Dhabi's hostile attitude towards Islah, a Sunni Islamist political party with a network of tribal and military affiliates,⁸ and Saudi Arabia's main military ally in the war, has led to questions over the compatibility of the two countries' agendas in Yemen, despite recent signs of a rapprochement between the UAE and Islah. Support for Salafist groups in the south and other parts of the country, by both of the senior members of the Saudi-led coalition, raises even more questions.

Adding another layer of complexity, the US is working closely with the UAE on a series of counterterrorism initiatives in southern Yemen that rely almost entirely on secessionist groups in order to oust militants from strategically important areas. There is little transparency around this campaign, and US troops have been accused of visiting UAE-run prisons where members of Islah are said to be detained arbitrarily, alongside alleged Al-Qaeda members, and abused.

Finally, the governorate of Al Mahra, an increasingly important smuggling hub, has become the site of a quiet competition for influence in Yemen between the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman. Residents worry that the formation of militias drawn from the local population and other parts of the south is driving the kind of 'militia-ization' seen elsewhere in the country, and could lead to strife in a part of Yemen that has thus far been spared the direct effects of war.

⁸ Islah is best described as a coalition of conservative Sunni tribal, business, military and religious interest groups that were supportive of the revolution against the northern Imamate in the 1960s. Between 1962 and 1970, nationalist Republicans backed by Egypt waged war against monarchist forces fighting on behalf of the Zaydi Shia Imamate that had ruled the north for much of the previous 1,000 years. The war ended with a loss for the Imamate, despite the support of the UK and Saudi Arabia, but incurred a huge cost for Cairo. The war has been described as 'Egypt's Vietnam'. Islah has a Muslim Brotherhood wing that rose to prominence in the 1990s and as a result is often described, erroneously, as the 'Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood'. It is somewhat unique in that it is a conservative, traditionalist and Islamist group but also fiercely republican in its outlook.

Southern groups will play an important role, for better or for worse, in deciding Yemen's future security, stability and territorial integrity. Yet international policymakers have paid little attention to the south since the civil war began, and they arguably remain focused on outdated notions of the balance of power inside the country. At best, according to a Western official, the south is the last line item on the agenda for meetings.⁹

At the time of writing, the UN-led peace process does not provide for the representation of southern groups or other local actors at talks, and UN Security Council resolutions and statements do not refer to the southern independence movement beyond calling for continued national unity. Track Two initiatives involving southerners are at an insufficiently advanced stage to lead to their integration into a broader peace process in the near future.

This is not a new issue. Historically, the south has been apportioned less significance than counterterrorism, infighting in Sana'a, or the rise of the Shia Zaydi Houthi movement. This is in part because of the lack of cohesion among southern pro-independence groups in the past, and also the historically peaceful nature of the secessionist movement.

Recent history should give international policymakers pause for thought. In 2014, it was widely assumed that the most important centres of power in Yemen were Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's former president, and Islah. Most analysis at the time saw Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as the greatest threat to the prevailing fragile order. Yet, in 2014, it was the Houthis, with Saleh's support, that upended the political transition process that followed Saleh's ouster at the end of 2011 (see below). Today, the country remains volatile beyond the frontlines of the war and the January 2018 battle for Aden, between STC-affiliated forces and Hadi loyalists, had disturbing echoes of the Houthi takeover of three and a half years earlier, not least in the extent to which foreign officials supposedly closely monitoring Yemen were caught off-guard.

This paper, researched and written between August 2017 and February 2018, is part of a wider project on Yemen conducted by the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House. It is designed to accompany the December 2017 paper *Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order*, from which it draws its conceptual framework. It gives some context on historical dynamics within the south, positions the region and its politics within the wider conflict in Yemen, and analyses key players and internal dynamics before outlining a series of proposals that resulted from a meeting of policymakers, expert analysts and Yemeni stakeholders hosted by Chatham House in Jordan, in October 2017.

⁹ As discussed at the Chatham House meeting in Jordan, October 2017.

2. Yemen's 'Southern Question' in Context: Dashed Expectations, Secessionist Sentiment

In 1990, after existing for 23 years, the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) merged with the northern Yemen Arab Republic. Before unification, the PDRY attempted to achieve in two decades what the UK, the colonial power in the south until 1967, had struggled to do over the course of the previous 130 years: unify a heterogeneous group of emirates, sultanates and tribal territories into a coherent whole, centered around the port of Aden, an important international trade hub and the headquarters for the local British administration.¹⁰

As the historian Paul Dresch writes, 'For most [southern] notables ... the only real tie with Aden before World War I was an annual visit to collect a small stipend and presents from the British of rifles and ammunition.'¹¹ Preparing to leave the region, the British created the Federation of South Arabia in 1959. By the early 1960s, the eastern sultanates of Al Mahra and Hadramawt had refused to join the federation while Aden, hitherto an effective city-state, had only agreed to participate under duress. Many parts of the south, like Yafa, which straddles the modern-day Lahj and Abyan governorates, had been autonomous and largely impenetrable throughout the period of ostensible British rule.

In 1967, the British withdrew from the south in the face of an intensifying independence movement led by the Arab nationalist Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen and the quasi-Marxist National Liberation Front, which were also engaged in a power struggle with one another.¹² The latter emerged as the dominant force on the ground, and declared the formation of the People's Republic of South Yemen, which later became the PDRY. The new state purged the wealthy emirs, sultans and sheikhs who had prospered under British rule, seizing their land. Many moved to the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, becoming wealthy and influential players in their adopted home countries.

The socialist PDRY weathered early crises, including a secession attempt by Hadramawt, whose people saw (and, arguably, still see) themselves as distinct from the rest of the south. The socialist state embroiled itself in regional revolutionary movements, most notably backing the socialist Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Gulf, which played a key role in Oman's Dhofar rebellion, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. The PDRY also supported leftist groups operating in the northern Yemen Arab Republic, which had undergone its own revolution in the 1960s, while the Yemen Arab Republic in turn supported rebel movements in the south.

External support for the PDRY came from the Soviet Union, East Germany and China. As a result, the monarchies of the Arabian peninsula perceived it as an existential, communist threat to a regional order of autocratic, dynastic rule. The rise of Arab republics in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya and northern Yemen, following the overthrow of European and US-backed monarchs, further compounded the perceived threat.

¹⁰ Dresch, P. (2000), *A Modern History of Yemen*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² For an exhaustive account of the competition between the two movements, see Brehony, N. (2013), *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia*, London: I. B. Tauris.

A border conflict and broader fears over the significance of a successful Arab socialist state led Saudi Arabia to lend lukewarm support to insurgent groups in south Yemen that were sponsored by the north's leadership – with whom Riyadh reluctantly reconciled in the 1970s after having supported the monarchist cause during the northern civil war.¹³ The PDRY simultaneously sponsored a rebellion against the northern state in Yemen's midlands. Border wars broke out between the two Yemens in 1972 and 1979.¹⁴

The PDRY was also beset by internal rifts. 'Despite the campaign against tribalism, the key personalities... built their power on tribal alliances in their home regions, often those emirates inherited from South Arabia, through patronage in the form of jobs in the military, security and civil structures,' writes Noel Brehony, a leading expert on the PDRY.¹⁵

Individuals from Lahj and Abyan governorates – who had been crucial to the formation of the National Liberation Front – became key political and military leaders in the newly formed PDRY, while many top Politburo leaders came from north Yemen, the source for mistrust among many southerners. In 1986, tensions between two different factions – an Al Dhale–Lahj–Hadramawt axis, and their rivals from an Abyan–Shabwa axis – led to a short but bloody civil war that led followers of the Abyani leader Ali Nasser Mohammed to flee to the north. The grievances engendered by this conflict, which are discussed in more detail below, still have resonance today.

Unity had long been touted as a solution to the myriad economic and social problems of the two Yemens but, after an initial wave of euphoria, southerners quickly came to question the merger.

Coupled with the ongoing collapse of the Soviet Union, which had provided the southern socialist state with considerable support, the 1986 civil war left the PDRY on the verge of bankruptcy. Its new leadership became convinced that a long-mooted merger with the more populous north was in the south's best interests. On 1 December 1989, the secretary-general of the south's Yemen Socialist Party (YSP), Ali Salem al-Beidh, hastily signed a unity deal with the north's President Saleh. Each man is said to have believed he could outwit the other: al-Beidh by appealing directly to northern Yemenis' socialist instincts, and Saleh by using the divide-and-rule tactics that had served him well in the north over the previous 12 years.

Unity had long been touted as a solution to the myriad economic and social problems of the two Yemens but, after an initial wave of euphoria, southerners quickly came to question the merger. They complained that northerners dominated political and economic life in the newly unified state, and that they were being marginalized. Part of al-Beidh's strategy in agreeing to unity had been to promote the YSP in the north and win power through the ballot box, but parliamentary elections in 1993 saw strong performances from the ruling northern General People's Congress (GPC) and its allies from Islah, which was spun off from the GPC before the elections to consolidate the tribal and Islamist vote. Furthermore, YSP officials were the targets of a campaign of assassinations in the north and south of the country, allegedly ordered by President Saleh, in the run-up to the voting.

¹³ Halliday, F. (1990), *Revolution and Foreign Policy: The Case of South Yemen 1967–1987*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Day, S. (2010), *Yemen on the Brink: The Political Challenge of Yemen's Southern Movement*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/yemen_south_movement.pdf (accessed 10 Oct. 2017).

¹⁵ Brehony, N. (2017), 'From Chaos to Chaos: South Yemen 50 Years After the British Departure', *Asian Affairs*, 48:3, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2017.1361249> (accessed 12 Oct. 2017).

The following year, southern political leaders announced their intention to quit the union. A brief, brutal civil war ensued from 4 May until 7 July 1994. It was won by a coalition of northern groups made up of conventional military forces, tribal militias and recently returned *mujahideen* from Afghanistan.¹⁶ The former PDRY secretary-general and loser of the 1986 war, Ali Nasser Mohammed, backed the north as did many of the officers loyal to him (among them the current president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who was named defence minister during the conflict).

Saudi Arabia supported the southern secessionists with cash and arms, largely in retribution for Saleh's refusal to condemn Saddam Hussein, his mentor, for the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. But the war was lost quickly and al-Beidh fled into exile in Lebanon where he continued to claim leadership of south Yemen and call for independence. Hadi was named vice president of the unified Yemen, replacing al-Beidh.

The tactics employed by the northerners during the conflict, which included the use of fighter jets in Aden, caused considerable damage to southern infrastructure. Combined with the post-war forced retirement of PDRY-era military officials and civil servants and the redistribution of land previously held by the state (in turn claimed by the sheikhly families who were major landowners before independence) to clients of the Sana'a regime, the additional perceived theft of the south's natural resources only exacerbated southern grievances. (Yemen became a moderately large oil producer in the 1990s, with a significant proportion of output originating in Hadramawt and Shabwa.)

In 2006, a coalition of former southern army officers forcibly retired after the 1994 war began to organize protests over low pensions and a lack of jobs. The following year, efforts began to form a coherent political movement whose primary goal was independence.¹⁷ While concern over secessionist sentiment grew in the capital, the amorphous nature of the Southern Movement (Al Hirak al-Janoubi) and a focus on higher-ranking priorities – including AQAP, the rise of the militant Houthi movement, macroeconomic woes and elite tensions – meant that the Sana'a elite and foreign diplomats viewed the independence movement as a second-tier issue at best.

The Southern Movement's reliance on an ageing set of leaders, most of whom lived outside Yemen and maintained the grudges and rivalries of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, along with its broad commitment to peaceful protest, may also have limited any sense of urgency among Yemeni and international policymakers. Southerners struggled to find a meaningful external backer for their cause, although regime insiders and Western officials claimed that Iran was backing al-Beidh and some of his supporters inside Yemen, including alleged militant groups in Al Dhale, with modest funds. Meanwhile, some southern leaders supported, or at least cooperated with, the Saleh regime, including members of the Hadrami and Shabwani aristocracy and business elite who were integrated into the GPC and Islah.

In 2011, Yemenis, inspired by uprisings elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, took to the streets first demanding reform and later the ouster of the Saleh regime. Following a March 2011 attack on protestors that left dozens dead and hundreds wounded, Islah, hitherto a key player in the regime,

¹⁶ Among the Afghanistan returnees was Tareq al-Fadhli, a mercurial figure that is emblematic of the complexities and contradictions of the many Yemeni identities. His father had been the ruler of the Fadhli sultanate, which occupied much of modern-day Abyan. He served under Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, and is reputed to be a founder member of the Abyan-Aden Islamic army, a precursor to AQAP. His sister is married to Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the powerful northern military leader with ties to Islah, while President Hadi's family served as bodyguards to the Al Fadhli family before they were ousted during the events of 1967. Al Fadhli has admitted to the author that he participated in the campaign of assassinations against YSP officials in the early 1990s, was a member of the Political Security Organization (the internal security services) in the 1990s, and is said to have been an AQAP member in the 2000s. He later joined the secessionist cause before allegedly returning to work with AQAP.

¹⁷ International Crisis Group (2011), *Breaking Point? Yemen's Southern Question*, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/114-breaking-point-yemen-s-southern-question.pdf> (accessed 12 Oct. 2017).

announced that it was joining the side of what later became known as the Yemeni revolution. Among those who split from the regime was Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, an Islah-affiliated military commander with Islamist leanings who had once been reckoned to be the second most powerful man in Yemen; and members of the Al Ahmar family, the leaders of the important Hashid tribal confederation and founding members of Islah.

The uprising was soon subsumed by regime infighting, with Saleh loyalists battling Islah-affiliated military and tribal groups in Sana'a and Taiz city. Fearful of a total collapse of the state that would empower AQAP, Western and Gulf states intervened, with the UN sending an envoy, Jamal Benomar, to broker peace. In November 2011, Saleh was finally persuaded to step down and hand power over to Hadi, his vice president of almost 20 years, under the so-called 'Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative.' The peace plan envisioned a two-year political transition to democracy, to be overseen by Hadi, who was named president after a one-candidate election in February 2012.¹⁸ Southern groups had initially approved of the uprising, but support waned when Islah entered the picture, with many secessionists describing the disagreements as a 'northern fight' that was further evidence that the more peaceable south should be given the opportunity to obtain its independence.

Attempts were made during the political transition period of 2012–14 to integrate southern voices into the political mainstream, most notably through the National Dialogue Conference¹⁹ and the formation of committees to discuss compensation for land and forced retirement. But many southerners felt more disenfranchised during the transition than they had before it, and most prominent Southern Movement leaders refused to participate. Disorganization, foreign diplomats' apparent lack of interest in the southern issue, and President Hadi's decision to in effect appoint southern representatives of his personal choosing at the National Dialogue Conference – all of whom were largely divorced from the Southern Movement's core supporters – deepened the sense of dislocation.²⁰

By 2011, many younger southerners – almost two-thirds of Yemen's population were born after the 1990 unity pact – had become disillusioned by the independence movement's ageing leadership, which was largely made up of PDRY-era leaders, many of whom were based outside of Yemen.²¹ Before the civil war broke out in 2015, grassroots movements in the south had grown in stature and had adopted an increasingly militant rhetoric. Over the course of 2014, youth activists in the region began to form neighbourhood groups aimed at giving separatists eventual physical control of territory at the local level. Eyeing the advancing Houthi takeover in the north, members of these organizations warned of the possibility of an armed uprising.²²

¹⁸ Rashad, M. (2011), 'Yemen's Saleh signs deal to give up power', Reuters, 23 November 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen/yemens-saleh-signs-deal-to-give-up-power-idUSTRE7AM0D020111123> (accessed 21 Oct. 2017).

¹⁹ For a detailed description of this period and the GCC Initiative, see Salisbury, P., Kinninmont, J., and Hill, G. (2013), *Yemen: Corruption, Capital Flight and Global Drivers of Conflict*, Chatham House Report, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/194239>.

²⁰ In February 2014, the author asked a group of prominent Southern Movement supporters in Aden for their opinion of Yassin Makkawi, the Hadi-appointed head of the southern delegation to the NDC, who had replaced the previous delegation leader, Mohammed Ali Ahmed. The group responded with the not entirely facetious answer: 'Who?'

²¹ Among the most prominent pre-war Southern Movement leaders were Ali Salem al-Beidh, Haydar Abubakr al-Attas, and Ali Nasser Mohammed, all of whom had served as either secretary-general or prime minister in the PDRY, and all of whom lived outside of Yemen.

²² Salisbury, P. (2015), 'To Win its War in Yemen, Saudi Arabia May Have to Split the Country in Two', Vice News, 10 April 2015, <https://news.vice.com/article/to-win-its-war-in-yemen-saudi-arabia-may-have-to-split-the-country-in-two> (accessed 21 Oct. 2017).

3. Yemen at War: A Power Shift

The civil war has significantly strengthened the south's bargaining power and position within Yemeni politics. During the early days of the conflict, loosely organized southern militias were able to push the alliance of the Houthi rebels and Saleh-aligned forces out of their territories, with the support of special and conventional forces, including air power, from the UAE.

Later, UAE-backed forces in Hadramawt ousted AQAP from the southeastern port city of Mukalla. Southerners have also played a key role in a UAE-planned military campaign along Yemen's west coast (UAE activities in the south fall under the broad umbrella of the coalition but are largely planned and executed independently from Saudi oversight).²³ Following the December 2017 assassination of Saleh, whose alliance with the Houthis had collapsed earlier that month, southern forces allied with President Hadi entered the Bayhan district of Shabwa, from neighbouring Mareb.

Box 1: UAE-backed forces in southern Yemen

Since 2015, UAE officials in Yemen have focused on identifying, equipping and training local security forces that they believe will help achieve the coalition's strategic objectives, and are also broadly aligned with the UAE's political worldview. The UAE has also trained and provided equipment for local police forces across the south. The UAE programme has an equivalent in the US train and equip programme in Syria, and arguably in the formation of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. The UAE programme also shares some of the inherent contradictions of such initiatives. Most notably, key UAE allies include Salafist groups that would appear to go against the UAE's public rhetoric around the promotion of religious moderation, and local leaders who publicly and privately state that their goal is independence, in contrast with the coalition's stated commitment to maintaining a unified Yemen.

At present, there are two broadly defined chains of command for UAE-backed forces in southern Yemen. In Lahj, Aden and Abyan, the paramilitary Security Belt units, which serve both military and police functions, are the main force on the ground. They are overseen from Aden by Munir Mahmoud al-Mahshali (better known as Abu al-Yamamah) and directed by local leaders. Described both as Security Belt or Support Brigade Forces, these paramilitary groups are supplemented by local policing and security structures largely directed by UAE-backed figures. The military campaign to seize Yemen's west coast, and most importantly the port town of Hodeidah, from the Houthis is also directed by UAE officials from Aden. The campaign is led by UAE-backed fighters from Lahj and the Tihama region of the west coast, and is directly commanded by Hamid Shukri al-Subaihi, a military leader from Lahj.

The second command axis is run from Mukalla and encompasses the Elite Forces in Shabwa and Hadramawt. The governor of the latter, Faraj Salemin al-Bahsani, is a senior commander in the Hadramawt Elite Forces, which were initially trained outside Yemen and deployed to seize Mukalla from AQAP in April 2016. Mohammed al-Qamishi leads the Shabwani Elite Forces, which have been slowly pushing north into AQAP-occupied territory since August 2017.

Other military units are directed from the Hadi-led Yemen National Army's coordination centre in Mareb, while the Hadi government has four Presidential Protection Brigades, collectively known as the Presidential Guard, in Aden, largely based around the presidential palace on the southeastern edge of the city as well as at a nearby military base and port facility. Hadi's interior minister, Ahmed al-Maysari and his deputy Ali Nasser Laksha'a, who works from Aden, also command some police and paramilitary forces. It is unclear to what extent the National Army-led units and UAE-backed forces coordinate with one another. They have clashed on several occasions, as is discussed in more detail elsewhere in this paper.

²³ Author's interviews with Western, UAE officials, London, Washington, DC, Abu Dhabi, February 2017–February 2018.

On the whole, southern forces have made some of the few territorial gains that have occurred since the conflict began. Fighting elsewhere has remained largely static. At the time of writing, southern groups controlled, to varying degrees, all eight governorates that make up the 'south', including some territory in the 'northern' governorates of Taiz and Hodeidah. Meanwhile, the Houthis have maintained a presence in several southern districts – in Kirsh (Lahj governorate), Damt (Al Dhale governorate), Mukayras (Abyan governorate) – and a now limited footprint in Shabwa. Where present in the south, the now defunct Houthi–Saleh alliance was content to maintain positions that ensured access to trade and smuggling routes, rather than attempting fresh territorial incursions.

After a quarter of a century of increasingly centralized control from Sana'a, southern governorates now have their own evolving military, police and security infrastructure, largely drawn from local populations. An emerging political leadership, closely tied to the new military and security structures, has been able to organize itself more coherently than past iterations of the Southern Movement, which relied heavily on the appeal of ageing exiles and struggled for structure and political vision beyond broad demands for independence. The independence movement in its latest iteration has a more coherent – if not necessarily stable or universally popular – structure and a more nuanced political platform. It is in the process of creating facts on the ground – new security and governance structures that look likely to lead to regional autonomy at a minimum.

The formation of new southern security and political structures are in no small part attributable to the support of the UAE, which has trained and equipped military units, police forces, Security Belt and Elite Force troops as well as smaller, less well-defined militias. It has also cultivated, financially supported and developed the capacity of key local leaders, particularly those affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), formed in May 2017.

The UAE's agenda in southern Yemen remains unclear. Many southerners believe that it supports secession, and its growing influence and close relationship with secessionist leaders has led to mounting tensions with the largely Saudi-backed government of President Hadi. Yet UAE officials say that they have no interest in sponsoring an independent south.²⁴

In private, UAE leaders question Hadi's fitness to lead the country, and they are deeply suspicious of his relationship with Islah,²⁵ affiliates of which are crucial to the anti-Houthi war effort in the north of the country.²⁶ Hadi in turn has reportedly accused the UAE of 'acting like occupiers'.²⁷

In February 2017, fighting broke out between members of the Presidential Guard and the UAE-backed secessionist forces that control Aden airport, which Hadi's men attempted to take over. The fighting only ended when a UAE Apache helicopter destroyed a Presidential Guard truck. In December, shortly after Saleh's death, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed, met with Islah leaders in Riyadh in what was widely seen as a thaw and a push towards a unified position for the Saudi-led coalition in the conflict. (In the same month, Islah renounced all ties to the Muslim Brotherhood in the hope of fostering better ties with the UAE.) But then, in January 2018, fighting broke out again in Aden between STC-affiliated forces and Hadi's Presidential Guard, with the secessionists gaining the upper hand and surrounding the presidential palace. Saudi Arabia intervened once more in a bid to contain the violence. At the time of writing, however, the standoff remained unresolved.

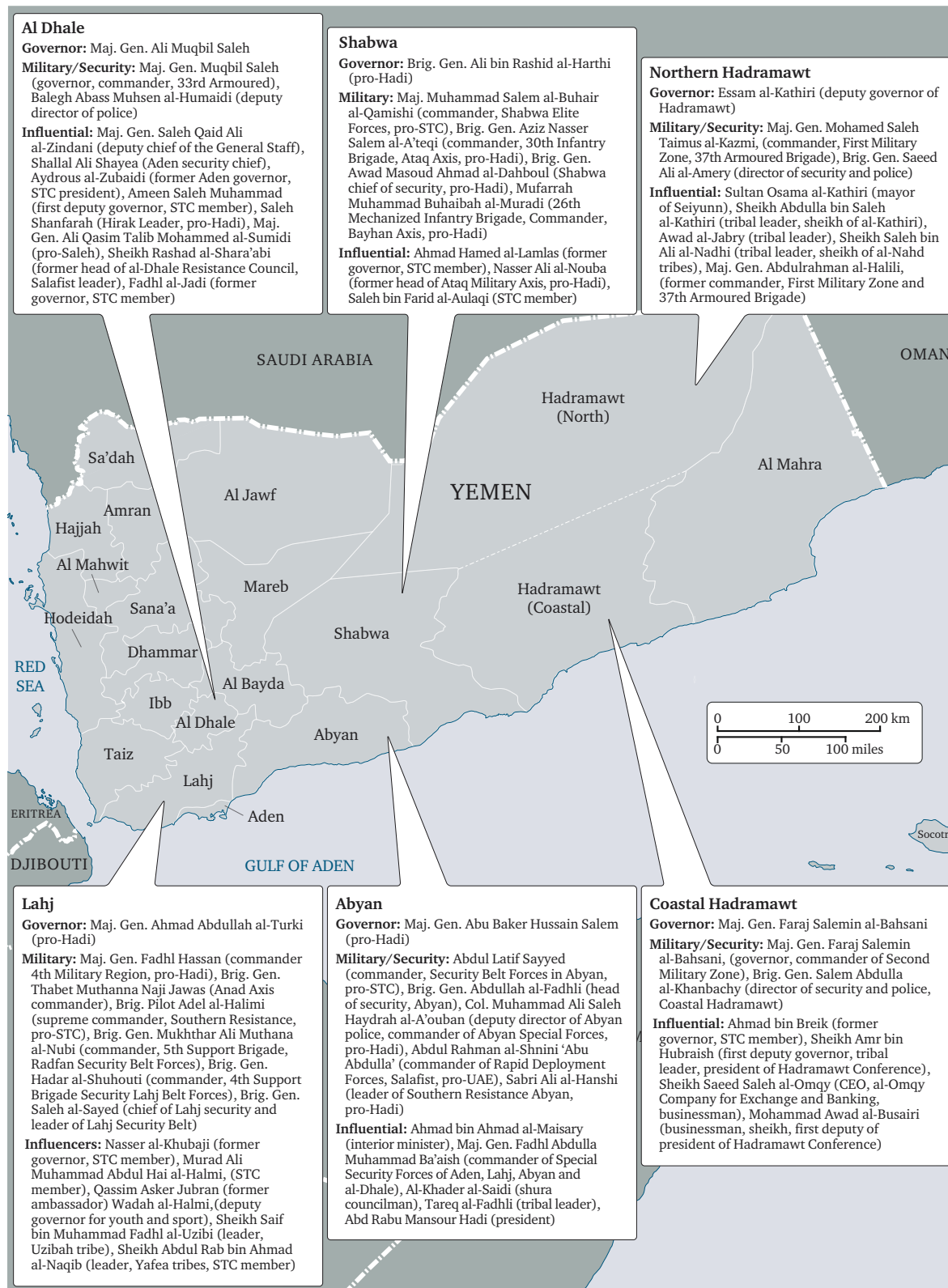
²⁴ Author's interviews, London and Abu Dhabi, March–May 2017.

²⁵ Author's interviews, Abu Dhabi, Washington, DC, March 2017–February 2018.

²⁶ Author's interviews, Abu Dhabi, London, Washington, DC, February 2017–February 2018.

²⁷ Hearst, D. (2017), *EXCLUSIVE: Yemen president says UAE acting like occupiers*, Middle East Eye, 3 May 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/exclusive-yemeni-president-says-emiratis-acting-occupiers-1965874493> (accessed 10 Oct. 2017).

Map 2: South Yemen – key military, political players



4. Key Players and Internal Dynamics: A Structural Analysis

This paper is part of a wider Chatham House project that maps the political economy and political geography that has emerged as a result of the civil war in Yemen. A central aim of the project is to identify zones of political control, governance and economic activity across the country.

There are several common features recurring across the south, such as the presence of broad secessionist sentiment. But to understand the order and systems that underpin the current 'chaos state', it is also important to evaluate dynamics at the level of individual governorates and districts in order to unpack internal divisions and potential conflict trigger points. While there is a tendency to describe the 'south' as a largely homogeneous space, there are in fact significant differences in the politics, identities and world view of those who live in the south and those that make up the Southern Movement. Many of those who have risen to prominence since the war began were not seen as major figures in the pre-war movement. What follows is a structural analysis of the current areas of territorial control, the key players and their interactions with one another. These structures are outlined in more detail in the accompanying maps of the south and Aden on pages 14 and 17.

Al Dhale and Lahj

While the independence movement was largely peaceful before 2015, some groups in Al Dhale and Lahj²⁸ (a notably restive area under British rule and key recruiting ground for military officers during the PDRY era) have adopted a militant stance since the mid-1990s. Local militias and government military units have clashed regularly, with the confrontation deepening during the 2012–14 transitional period.²⁹ Support for these groups allegedly came from al-Beidh, the former southern leader, who has been accused of receiving funds from Iran.³⁰

The Al Dhale and Lahj militias had become increasingly influential in some secessionist circles in the years before the war. Billing themselves as the Southern Resistance, they advised affiliates in Aden and other governorates on the formation of cell-like organizations in 2013 and 2014 that were key to the war effort against the Houthis–Saleh alliance in 2015.³¹ Key players in Al Dhale included militia leaders like Aydrous al-Zubaidi, a veteran of the PDRY air force who fought in the 1994 war, his brother Mohammed, and Shelal Ali Shayeh'a, the son of a senior PDRY security official killed during the failed 1986 attempted coup. Local political figures included Fadhl Mohammed Hussein al-Jadi, a PDRY-era education specialist who went on to become governor of Al Dhale.

²⁸ Under the PDRY, much of modern-day Al Dhale was part of Lahj governorate; the current divisions were drawn up in 1998.

²⁹ IRIN News (2014), 'Limited humanitarian access to Yemen's Al Dhale Governorate', 11 March 2014, <https://www.irinnews.org/news/2014/03/11/limited-humanitarian-access-yemen-s-al-dhale-governorat> (accessed 21 Oct. 2017).

³⁰ Salisbury, P. (2015), *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, Research Paper, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150218YemenIranSaudi.pdf.

³¹ Author's interviews in Aden, October 2014, and via social media messaging, October 2017.

In the Saleh and Hadi eras, the Al Dhale faction of the Southern Movement was treated as a major security threat. Shaye'a was accused of planning a bomb attack on a sports stadium in Aden, in 2010, which killed four people.³² Hostilities worsened in 2014 when heavy fighting started between militias in Al Dhale and local military units.³³ After the fighting broke out, Hadi repeatedly refused to move the local military commander, who had gained notoriety in 2011 for his excesses during fighting in Taiz, to a new post despite mounting claims of indiscriminate violence against the local population. Officials in the administration at the time repeated the claim that the Al Dhale militias were Iran-backed.

The Al Dhale groups were among the best-organized and effective fighters in the south when war broke out, and among the first to reclaim territory from the Houthis–Saleh alliance. Unlike other southern groups, they did so largely without the assistance of the UAE, earning the respect of many southerners, and of Abu Dhabi. In December 2015, al-Zubaidi was named governor of Aden, which was in disarray and the country's temporary capital at that time. Shaye'a was made head of security of the governorate and Mohammed Hussein al-Khalili, a militia leader from Al Dhale, was entrusted with securing Aden airport. They were appointed due to their perceived military prowess, and were widely seen as being favoured by the UAE, which had struggled to find reliable local allies and noted their successes against the Houthis. Fadhl al-Jadi was named governor of Al Dhale in June 2015, and would later take part in the formation of the STC along with al-Zubaidi (see below).

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The Al Dhale faction has faced some resistance from other secessionists, including fellow Dhaleis, most notably from Saleh al-Shanfara, who enjoys a close relationship with President Hadi, as does Khaled Musai'ed Ali, another prominent secessionist from the area. Ali Muqbil Saleh, the commander of the local 33rd Armoured Brigade is also said to be aligned with Hadi.

Al Dhale is notable for being secured largely by local militias rather than by the kind of Security Belt or Elite Force structure promoted by the UAE in other governorates. Meanwhile, the Houthis maintain a presence in Damt, the northernmost district of the governorate.

In Lahj governorate, key players include Nasser al-Khubaji, a former parliamentarian who joined the Southern Movement in the late 2000s, Mahmoud al-Subaihi, a military leader who was named defence minister by Hadi in 2014 and was captured during the fighting in Aden in 2015, and Haytham Qasem Taher, the former defence minister. Fadhl Hassan and Thabet Naji Jawas, military leaders who served in the unified military under Saleh and maintain local command postings, are said to maintain good relations with Hadi.

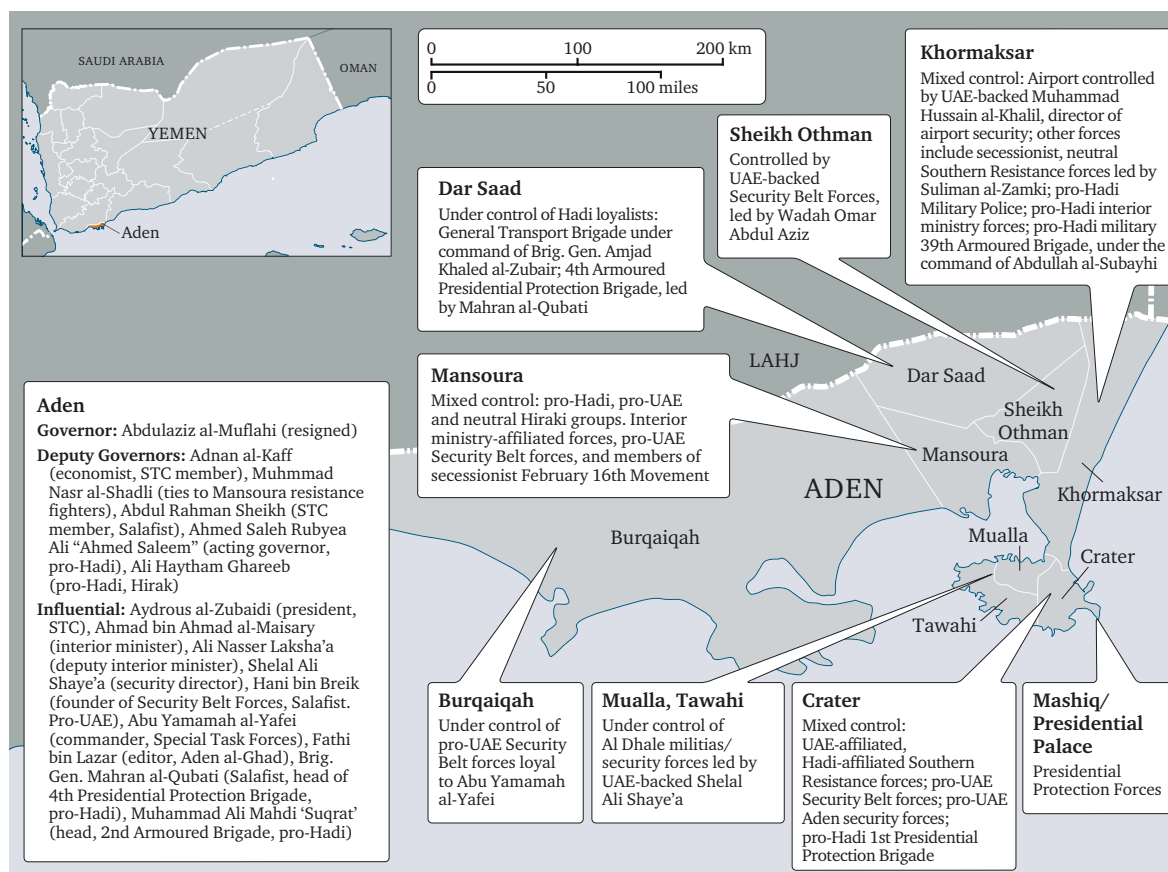
Al-Khubaji was governor of Lahj before being replaced by Ahmed Abdullah al-Turki in December 2017. Military leaders from Lahj, allegedly with Salafist leanings, have played a leading role in the UAE-coordinated campaign against the Houthi–Saleh alliance along the Bab al-Mandeb coast since early 2017.

³² Salisbury, P. (2013), 'Yemen's Southern Intifada', *Foreign Policy*, 13 March 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/13/yemens-southern-intifada/> (accessed 21 Oct. 2017).

³³ IRIN News (2014), 'Limited humanitarian access to Yemen's Al Dhale Governorate'.

The Lahj Security Belt forces, which are trained and equipped by the UAE and led by Mukhtar Ali Muthna Saleh al-Nubi, bolster security in the governorate. Houthi forces retain a presence in the northwestern Kirsh district of Lahj.

Map 3: Aden – territorial divisions



Aden

In 2015, President Hadi named Aden the temporary capital of Yemen. Aden is probably the most heavily contested non-frontline space in the civil war. It is divided into multiple areas of influence and was the focal point of multiple secessionist rallies both before and since the war began.

In December 2015, militias from Al Dhale led by al-Zubaidi and Shaye'a (see above) entered Mualla port on the Aden peninsula, with the backing of the UAE, and they remain the prevailing, although not the only, force in the area. These militias are also dominant at Tawahi port and in the central Crater district. Despite al-Zubaidi's April 2017 ouster as governor of Aden, the militias and Shaye'a remain in place. Security Belt forces led by Abu Yamamah al-Yafei have also come to play an important role in local security.

A mix of UAE-backed forces, directed by Shaye'a, and local unaffiliated secessionist militias have partial control of other districts, such as Khormaksar, where a strategically important airport and a key security facility are located. Salafist militias operating under the aegis of the Security Belt

structure play a key role elsewhere in the city, while secessionist groups that are not integrated into either the Hadi or the UAE patronage networks are also present across Aden.

Local contacts describe Mansoura, Dar Saad and Sheikh Othman districts as possibly the least secure parts of the city, with AQAP and groups linked to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) reported to have a presence in these areas, where pro-UAE Security Belt forces are also present.³⁴ Aden has been the site of repeated clashes between these different groups, and of multiple attacks by AQAP and the local ISIS branch.

Other key players in the city include Hadi, whose Presidential Guard is led by his son, Nasser and a leading Salafist commander, Mahran al-Qubati, and senior interior ministry officials including Ahmed al-Maysari, the minister, and his deputy Ali Nasser al-Laksha'a (Hadi, however, is not based in Aden; he is rumoured to be barred from returning to the city by the UAE). In April 2017, Hadi replaced al-Zubaidi with Abdulaziz al-Muflahi, a technocrat, who resigned later in the year. Local government is now ostensibly run by deputy governor Ahmad Salim Rubayya Ali, a pro-Hadi, US-educated former pro-secession activist.

Abyan

Abyan, to the east of Aden, is President Hadi's home province and has been the site of repeated incursions by AQAP. An AQAP precursor, the Abyan-Aden Islamic Army was formed in the area, and in 2011 AQAP announced the formation of a prototypical 'emirate' in Zinjibar, the biggest city in the governorate. During a campaign in 2012 to restore control over the area, the Hadi government turned to the local Popular Committees militias, which had already prevented further AQAP expansion, to bolster its conventional military forces. The Popular Committees were led by Abdul Latif Sayyed, a reputed former AQAP commander.

In 2014, several members of the Popular Committees were said to be amassing in Aden, but few were involved in the defence of the city the following year. Instead, they returned to Abyan to fight against the Houthis-Saleh alliance alongside members of the regional military axis. Since 2015, the governorate has largely been under the control of local forces, although the Houthis maintain a position in Mukayras district in the northwest.

Governor Abu Bakr Hussein Salem, a popular local military leader seen as a Hadi loyalist, is the commander of the regional military axis. He competes for influence with the UAE-backed heads of local Security Belt forces: Popular Committees' leader Abdelatif Sayyid, whose loyalties are not entirely certain, and chief of security Abdullah al-Fadhli. The pro-Hadi police chief, Colonel Muhammad Ali Saleh Haydrah al-A'ouban, who reports to the interior ministry, is also said to be an important player. It is unclear who, if anyone, holds the balance of power in the governorate, and southerners describe it as the least stable part of the region.

Shabwa

Shabwa, a highly tribal area, was for a period seen as being as unstable as Abyan. Residents report an improving security situation since mid-2017 when local UAE-backed Elite Forces, working closely with Elite Forces from neighbouring Hadramawt, launched an offensive against AQAP cells in the

³⁴ Author's and consultant's interviews, in-person in Yemen and via telephone, August 2017–February 2018.

governorate.³⁵ The Shabwani Elite Forces, which were initially composed of just a few tribal groups but later expanded to include members from a broader range of tribes, have established a dominant position across the governorate.³⁶ The Shabwani Elite Forces have seized territory from AQAP and limited its ability to operate freely. In December 2017, assorted Shabwani forces, separate from the UAE-backed Elite Forces and led by pro-Hadi commanders, were also able to push the Houthis out of the northwestern district of Bayhan, which they had contested since the beginning of the war and had been a key smuggling route for the northern group (smuggling routes passing through Bayhan are said to have quickly become operational after the rout, however).

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As noted earlier, not all military bodies in Shabwa are UAE-backed. The main force fighting the Houthi–Saleh alliance in the Bayhan district before December 2017 was the Hadi-aligned 19th Infantry Brigade. Its members complained of a lack of support from the UAE-backed Elite Forces.³⁷ When support did arrive it was dispatched from Mareb, under the command of the formal Yemen National Army rather than the Shabwani Elite Forces. Government insiders have claimed that the UAE-backed Shabwani Elite Forces isolated the 19th Brigade deliberately so as to weaken President Hadi's forces in the south. Since the push into Bayhan, the Shabwani Elite Forces have entered nearby Ataq, the governorate's capital, and in October 2017 they acted as a protection force for local protestors who complained of corruption and demanded the integration of the governorate into the STC, which Hadi opposes (see below).

There is speculation that the governorate could be a future site of conflict between Islah-affiliated northern and southern forces, and UAE-backed secessionist groups due to disputes between forces operating in Shabwa, the close proximity of the Yemen National Army's command centre, led by Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, in neighbouring Mareb, and Shabwa's status as an oil-producing region (and as the main route for a gas-export pipeline linking Mareb with the Gulf of Aden). 'Everyone is playing games there and many people believe there is competition over control of Al Bayda [another neighbouring "northern" governorate] between the UAE and Ali Mohsen', according to a local Shabwani leader, 'With all of the tensions over Aden, it is possible that it will spill over here.'³⁸

Hadramawt

Hadramawt is the largest governorate in Yemen and runs the length of the country from the southern coast to the northern border with Saudi Arabia. Control of this vast area is divided between UAE-backed forces – which have held the southern port city of Mukalla and surrounding areas since early 2016, after seizing them from AQAP – and military units, part of the First Military District overseen by the Hadi government, based in and around the central city of Seiyunn and the northern desert areas of the city. The latter have not been engaged in the wider conflict, and their loyalties remain a matter of debate.

³⁵ Author's interviews, August 2017–February 2018.

³⁶ Local sources have also reported tensions between the UAE and members of an important tribe, the Aulaqui, due to members of the latter not being recruited for UAE forces because of alleged ties to Islah and AQAP. A member of a senior Aulaqui family has said that this issue has been resolved.

³⁷ Author's interview with Hadi government official, January 2018.

³⁸ Author's conversation, via messaging application, with contacts in Yemen and New York, February 2018.

The former commander of the Seiyunn-headquartered First Military District, Abdulrahman al-Halili, was broadly seen as a Saleh loyalist but declared his support for President Hadi early on in the war. He was replaced in mid-2016 by Mohamed Saleh Taimus, an Abyani perceived as being aligned with Islah and Ali Mohsen. Islah-aligned tribal and military forces also control a border crossing connecting the governorate with Saudi Arabia. Before Saleh's death, several contacts reported that loyalties among the military forces stationed in northern Hadramawt were divided between Saleh and Mohsen loyalists and that this had led to internal tensions.³⁹

Like their Shabwani neighbours, Hadramis fear the possibility of a battle between coastal, UAE-backed forces and the First Military District units stationed in the north of the governorate. The governor of Hadramawt and commander of the Hadramawt Elite Forces, Faraj Salemin al-Bahsani, has not visited Seiyunn, and is said to be nervous about doing so, while Taimus has not travelled south to Mukalla. 'People in Mukalla worry that the northerners could come south and try to take over, so there is discussion over whether or not [the Hadrawani Elite Forces] should strike first,' said a local observer.⁴⁰

Al Mahra

Al Mahra, Yemen's easternmost governorate, borders Oman to the east and Saudi Arabia to the north. It is one of the largest Yemeni governorates but contains the smallest population and is among the most marginalized regions in the country. Lacking in natural resources beyond some fisheries, Al Mahra was not of great interest to the Saleh regime. Since 2015, however, while elsewhere ports have become more restricted, Al Mahra's accessible ports have made it a key trade and smuggling route, with goods entering Yemen from across the region, particularly through Al Nishtoun port in the southeast, as well as from Oman and the UAE over its land borders.

Pre-war Yemeni military units stationed in Al Mahra have remained effectively neutral during the conflict and are said to be balanced in their loyalties in a manner similar to military units in Hadramawt, between both Saleh and Mohsen loyalists. That said, control of the governorate is largely divided between its tribes, for whose loyalties Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE have been vying since at least 2016. In 2017, Saudi and UAE-backed Mahri forces began to appear across the governorate, with a large contingent deployed to the capital, Al Ghaydah, in November 2017, apparently to take control of the airport and to combat smuggling rings allegedly operating out of the port.

Many Mahris do not see themselves as Yemenis, and argue that they are a distinct people who should have been allowed to vote in an independence referendum when British rule came to an end. Tribal leaders worry that overt competition for influence and the 'militarization' of the governorate could destabilize it. 'We can see the fire far away and we are worried that it will soon come to us,' said one Mahri tribal sheikh.⁴¹

³⁹ Author's interviews, via telephone and messaging apps, August–October 2017.

⁴⁰ Author's interview via messaging app, December 2017.

⁴¹ Author's interview in Oman, December 2017.

5. Overlapping Divisions: Unintended Consequences and the Seeds of Future Conflict

Salafist groups and AQAP

Beyond the key local players, important actors in southern Yemen include a broad range of Salafist groups, AQAP and the local branch of ISIS. Before the civil war began, the activities of Salafist groups were limited to violent clashes over the Dar al-Hadith Institute schools at Dammaj and Kitaf in the northern governorate of Sa'dah, and to proselytizing and recruiting at mosques across the country, particularly in Aden. From 2012 onwards, Salafist clerics began to play an increasingly visible role in the Southern Movement, leading prayers before and after marches. Sheikh Hussein bin Shuaib, a southern Salafist, took a leading role in organizing a permanent protest camp in Aden in late 2014. (While the Southern Movement has painted itself as broadly secular, like most Yemeni groups the vast majority of its members are of Muslim heritage and it has had a more complex relationship with Islamist groups up to and including Al-Qaeda than its leaders would like to admit.)

In 2014, fighting between Salafists and the Houthis in Sa'dah escalated, leading the Hadi government to negotiate the evacuation of Salafist fighters and students from the governorate, which many Salafists saw as a betrayal. There are competing narratives around the violence in Dammaj and Kitaf; Salafists claim that the Houthis attacked their facilities, forcing them to retaliate defensively, while the Houthis claim the Dar al-Hadith Institute schools were a front for militant training camps. Residents of the schools scattered across the country, with many ultimately settling in Aden.

During the defence of Aden in 2015, Salafist groups demonstrated a knack for military organization and efficient aid distribution. When UAE special forces entered the city, they quickly identified them as the most effective groups and partnered with them extensively. During this period, Adenis also reported the presence in the city of AQAP fighters who often fought alongside Salafists and informal Southern Resistance militias.

For some observers, the UAE's decision to partner with Salafist groups may appear at odds with its broader policy of opposition to political Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. But the UAE tolerates the presence of Salafist clerics across the emirates, and it also sponsors Salafist militias in Libya. This may be because it sees Salafist groups as being quietist in nature – doctrinally adverse to the idea of engaging in politics – as opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood, which has a clear, transnational and transformative political agenda. The formation of the first of the UAE-backed Security Belt forces was overseen by a Salafist leader, Hani bin Breik, who remains an influential figure in the south as the vice president and 'spiritual leader' of the STC, and is also seen as a staunch UAE ally.

The different militia leaders are not uniformly UAE-backed or secessionist, however. Some Salafist groups remained in Aden city after it was liberated, while others went on to fight elsewhere. Later, some relocated to western Saudi Arabia in order to lead efforts to push over the border into Sa'dah. The leader of one of the most important Salafist militias in Aden, Basem Mehdhar, sent men to fight in Taiz after the liberation of Aden before relocating to the Saudi–Yemen border, apparently under the direct patronage of Riyadh. His brother, Ahmed, is an influential presence in Aden's Mansoura district.

In early 2017, Mehdhar's men backed President Hadi during the short battle for Aden's airport, and they remain a fixture at the presidential palace. Mahran al-Qubati, who heads the Fourth Presidential Protection Brigade (part of the Presidential Guard) in Aden, is another Salafist leader whose men have fought there and on the Saudi border. Pro-Hadi commanders in western Taiz – under the command structure of the so-called 'Giants Brigade' – who have assisted in the UAE-led campaign along Yemen's west coast, are also of Salafist orientation, and are said to have supported Hadi during the fighting in Aden in January 2018, leading to tensions with their UAE-backed peers.

AQAP also maintained a presence in Aden after its liberation, particularly in the Mansoura and Sheikh Othman districts, where its local emir, 'Abu Salem', operated openly from a residence well known to locals until 2016. Mansoura was under the nominal control of Salafists led by Mehdhar at the time. AQAP was eventually pushed out of the city (or, in the telling of some residents, it left as part of a negotiated exit) after a period of incursion into Mansoura by forces led by Shelal Ali Shaye'a, the UAE-backed Aden security chief, supported by UAE air cover.⁴²

AQAP was ousted from Mukalla in early 2016, and it has since retreated to its traditional hinterlands in the mountainous and desert territory between Shabwa, Mareb and Abyan governorates. It is still present in Taiz and Al Bayda, where its members participate in the fight against the Houthis, and it has carried out an increasingly intensive campaign of bombings and attacks on UAE-backed forces across the south since late 2016.

While some Salafist militias are participating in the UAE-led campaign against AQAP in Shabwa and Abyan there is, according to a well-informed southern journalist, who has good relations with most factions, a 'big grey area' – blurred ideological lines and close direct relationships – between some Salafist groups and AQAP:

Some Salafis want nothing to do with AQAP, but others see them as their brothers, as like-minded people... In Taiz, the Salafis and AQAP fight side by side, as they did in Aden... For now there is a separation between them but this can also change. It could go either way – the Salafis could become AQAP or AQAP people could become Salafis. What is more important is that their ideology is not very different [i.e. promotes sectarian violence].⁴³

In October 2017, Adil Abduh Fari Uthman al-Dhubhani, better known as 'Abu al-Abbas', a UAE-backed Salafist leader and a key player in the fight for Taiz, was singled out as a designated terrorist by the US Department of the Treasury, for alleged ties to both AQAP and the local ISIS branch.⁴⁴

The current iterations of AQAP and ISIS in Yemen are rooted in external support for conservative mosques and madrasas across the country as part of the campaign by Gulf states (Saudi Arabia in particular) against secularism and socialism, as well as Yemeni state support for returning 'Afghan Arabs' who had fought as *mujahideen* in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Saleh government used these radicalized fighters to wage its campaign of assassinations against leading southern officials after unification, despite concerns from Western observers that they were also focused on attacking Western interests in Yemen.⁴⁵ Saleh also used the Afghan Arabs during the 1994

⁴² A key barrier to Shaye'a's entrance into the district had been fears over clashes between his men and Salafist fighters.

⁴³ Author's interview, via messaging app, December 2017.

⁴⁴ US Department of the Treasury (2017), Office of Foreign Assets Control, 'Counter Terrorism Designations', 25 October 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20171025.aspx> (accessed 14 Dec. 2017).

⁴⁵ In a 2014 interview with the author, the leading Afghan Arab, Tareq al-Fadhli said that after he was accused of taking part in what would later be described as Al-Qaeda's first attack on the West – the 1992 bombing of a hotel in Aden thought, erroneously, to be hosting US military personnel – he fled to the mountains of Abyan. 'It's OK if you kill Communists [southern leaders],' he claimed a representative from Sana'a told him, laughing, 'but you can't do anything to the Americans.'

civil war. The leaders of the Islamic Jihad Movement and the Abyan-Aden Islamic army – precursor movements to AQAP – were among those given at least tentative support by the regime. Given that AQAP came to be seen as one of the most dangerous Al-Qaeda groups and was a priority for Western officials before the current war began, there is good reason to worry about the long-term consequences of support for Salafist groups. Many Yemenis, including pro-secession southerners, are already warning of blowback. Residents of Al Mahra note with concern that there are plans to build a new Dar al-Hadith Institute, once based in Sa'dah, in the Mahri town of Qishr.

Echoes of the past: the Toghma and the Zomra

The past serves as a useful guide to some of the complexities of current southern politics, particularly the flashpoint of the 1986 civil war between different factions of the PDRY. Although the socialist republic was publicly opposed to tribal society, many of its senior leaders depended on tribal and local support from their home governorates for their power.

Following the execution of Salim Rubayya Ali, the powerful head of state who ruled the south for almost a decade, in 1978, divisions along regional lines became increasingly visible. Rubayya was replaced by Abdulfattah Ismail, a northerner, who was then pushed aside by Ali Nasser Mohammed, his prime minister, whose power base was drawn largely from support in Abyan and Shabwa. Ali Nasser quickly promoted many senior military leaders from Lahj and modern-day Al Dhale to positions of power in the military. This group later removed him from the post of prime minister (he retained the presidency), replacing him with Haydar al-Attas, a Hadrami technocrat.

Many observers see current internal dynamics in the south as playing out along similar lines as the 1986 war.

In 1986, Ali Nasser launched a coup, sparking a short but brutal civil war that left as many as 10,000 people dead and ended with a victory for the Al Dhale–Lahj axis. He fled to the republican north, taking an estimated 30,000 men with him, among them Hadi. This group was known colloquially as the *Zomra* and the winners from Lahj and Hadramawt were known as the *Toghma*.

After the 1986 civil war, the PDRY government struggled to control the territories loyal to the new Politburo's rivals. It 'had little authority in Abyan and Shabwa in the late 1980s',⁴⁶ and in 1990 the Hadrami secretary general of the Yemen Socialist Party, Ali Salem al-Beidh, moved to avert state collapse precipitated by the civil war and waning Soviet support by pushing through the unity pact with the north.

In 1994, many *Zomra* fought on the side of the Saleh regime. Hadi, who had been a major-general in the PDRY military, was named defence minister and formally led the war effort. He was named vice-president after the campaign was brought to a successful conclusion.

⁴⁶ Brehony, N. (2017), 'From Chaos to Chaos: South Yemen 50 Years After the British Departure'.

Many observers see current internal dynamics in the south as playing out along similar lines as the 1986 war. 'You have the Al Dhale and Lahj military men against the Abyanis, the Hadramis doing their best to be as independent as possible but working with the Dhaleii and Lahji guys, and then Shabwa stuck in the middle, with the Hadramis trying to pull them back into their sphere,' said a Yemeni political analyst, referring to historical connections between Hadramawt and eastern Shabwa.⁴⁷

The Southern Transitional Council

The Southern Transitional Council is emblematic of the complex political currents and tensions at play in the south. It was formed in May 2017, shortly after President Hadi dismissed the governor of Aden, Aydrous al-Zubaidi (the secessionist military leader who had risen to prominence after 2015, backed by Abu Dhabi), and Hani bin Breik (the Salafist militia commander with secessionist leanings who was instrumental in the formation of the Security Belt forces). Since the formation of the STC, which aims to represent southern interests in future political processes, Hadi has sacked the governors of Al Dhale, Hadramawt, Lahj and Shabwa, who had joined the STC. The STC now presents itself as a shadow government or government-in-waiting, and describes the various UAE-backed groups operating on the ground as the 'Southern Resistance Forces'.

The STC has set up local councils and correspondent offices, and it has held several meetings of the self-proclaimed southern National Assembly. Al-Zubaidi has toured the south while prominent STC members, including leading security officials such as the Security Belt leader Abu al-Yamamah, have appeared at STC-led meetings across the country and commented regularly on STC affairs.

The STC and its leadership are not universally popular in the south, and neither is the UAE, which is increasingly seen as pursuing an agenda of domination over the south. President Hadi has some allies in the region, including military and political leaders at the governorate level who depend on him for financial support. A relatively large number of secessionists resent the STC and its allies, in no small part because they have been excluded from UAE-funded patronage networks – and because they see the STC as being subservient to the UAE's interests first and foremost.

While there are pockets of opposition across the south, the STC structures represent the most organized, well-armed and most confident secessionist grouping the south has seen since the civil war of 1994. This creates a major policy dilemma for international diplomats.

Members of Islah, which had a considerable presence in the south before the war, have taken a strong stance against the STC and the UAE as the result of an apparent campaign against them in the region. There have been several international reports accusing the UAE of abusing Islahi prisoners at detention facilities across the south of Yemen.⁴⁸

The balance of power across the south appears to favour the UAE-backed parallel security and political institutions, although not definitively so. While there are pockets of opposition across the south, the STC structures represent the most organized, well-armed and most confident secessionist

⁴⁷ Author's interview, via telephone, September 2017.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Human Rights Watch (2017), 'Yemen: UAE Backs Abusive Local Forces', 22 June 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/22/yemen-uae-backs-abusive-local-forces> (accessed 12 Oct. 2017).

grouping the south has seen since the civil war of 1994. This creates a major policy dilemma for international diplomats. They need to take the STC seriously, yet doing so risks legitimizing a non-state armed group or political movement. The Hadi government argues that this was one of the key mistakes made with regard to the Houthis in 2014.

Hadi's legitimacy

President Hadi's power is derived from his somewhat limited capacity to distribute funds and other forms of patronage, and from his ability to issue decrees removing and appointing local leaders and ministers. It is broadly accepted in diplomatic circles that a successful peace process is likely to see him either reduced to the status of figurehead or replaced under a mechanism similar to the GCC initiative of 2011, through which he succeeded Saleh. Members of his government resist this idea, saying that the president can only be replaced through the ballot box.

It can be argued that Hadi has little in the way of a real constituency and lacks the confidence of the government's external backers, which only sustain his presidency because of his symbolic and legal importance within the context of the war. Yet he remains Yemen's internationally recognized president, his status arguably codified in UN Security Council Resolution 2216. The UAE's presence in the country is as part of the Saudi-led military coalition. In turn, the coalition says its campaign in Yemen is primarily driven by a desire to support the 'legitimate' government. Hadi's government is also a key component of ongoing UN-led mediation efforts. If his position were to become untenable, as would likely be the case in the event of outright southern secession, it is not clear how the UN could continue the process. Preventing tensions between Hadi, the secessionists and the UAE from boiling over is therefore essential to a successful peace process.

Hadi government officials argue that the international community should not open a dialogue with southern leaders as engaging with non-state actors undermines it and lends a veneer of legitimacy to the secessionist cause. This, however, creates a catch-22 situation. Diplomats do worry that speaking to southerners will encourage them to believe independence is achievable, yet they cannot encourage them to engage in diplomacy or mediate in the event of major disputes if they have no contact with the south.

The UN, in particular, needs to engage with southern constituencies in order to better understand their incentives for cooperation with the peace process and to be able to mediate should conflict break out between rival factions in the south. The office of the UN special envoy (in March 2018, Martin Griffiths, a veteran British mediator, replaced the outgoing Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed as envoy) plans to open an office in Aden. This is a step in the right direction.

Engagement with southern leaders is also necessary to avoid some of the missteps of the 2013–14 National Dialogue Conference, where the south was represented by a small delegation led by an individual, Yassin Makkawi, who was relatively unknown to most southerners. Despite this, the UN's current framework for peace after a ceasefire deal outlines the formation of a 'national body' based on delegations at the National Dialogue Conference.

The role of external players

Historically, one of the major barriers to a more cohesive Southern Movement was the lack of external support for its cause and the relatively impoverished and diffuse diaspora of southerners. The GCC countries supported the 1994 push for independence, more because of their anger at Saleh's support for Saddam Hussein than of any sympathy for the former socialist southern state. Following the northern victory in 1994, the Gulf states reconciled with Saleh and ended their support for the southern independence movement, in line with a general policy of backing the status quo in Arab states.

In the 2000s, Yemeni officials and foreign diplomats accused Iran of supporting secessionist factions, through the Beirut-based Ali Salem al-Beidh and the Mukalla-based Hassan Baoum. The two are said to have lost this support after refusing to back the Houthi incursion into southern Yemen in 2015.⁴⁹ Iran's support for southern groups was very limited and, like its early support for the Houthis, a speculative bet rather than an attempt to build a cohesive movement. However, Iran is said to maintain cordial relations with many southern leaders, and could attempt to build on this in the future.

The intervention of the UAE in southern Yemen in 2015, and its subsequent focus on training, equipping and supporting local militias, has been a step change. The political and financial support given to leaders like al-Zubaidi and bin Breik has helped create the most cohesive southern political structure since the early 1990s.

For many observers, the UAE's role poses as many questions as it resolves: why has it been willing to expend so much effort and financial resources on territory that does not directly affect its security and stability (though the trade routes around the Horn of Africa are important to its economy)? What are its intentions for the south and how long will it support factions there?

Most likely the UAE did not enter southern Yemen with a specific strategic objective, but rather wished to bolster its main regional ally, Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰ The subsequent depth of its engagement has been driven by the perceived inability of the Hadi government to govern effectively, and the desire to create a Houthi and Islah-free enclave. Yemen is also, according to a Western diplomat, 'an important experiment' for the UAE as it tests its ability to shape events across the region.⁵¹ 'They are learning a lot in Yemen, some of it good, some of it bad.' The diplomat also points to the UAE's lack of interest in discussing its plans or approach to the south: 'The problem we have is that they are not really telling us about it.'

⁴⁹ Salisbury (2015), *Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'*. It is reported that al-Zubaidi and Shaye'a, the Al Dhale military leaders, have received arms, training and funding from Iran funnelled through al-Beidh.

⁵⁰ Author's interviews in the UAE, London and Washington, DC, over the course of 2017.

⁵¹ Author's interview, location withheld to protect source, October 2017.

6. A New Approach?

Yemen's south is a powder keg of tensions and rivalries, made all the more volatile by the proliferation of armed groups and the influx of weapons since the recent civil war began. Plausible scenarios that could exacerbate an already volatile situation in the near term include an outright declaration of secession, an unrestrained internal conflict over control of Aden, or the gradual formation of a de facto autonomous or independent state having to deal with the presence of sectarian militias.

This last scenario became closer to reality in January 2018 when fighting broke out between forces loyal to Hadi and STC-backed Security Belt and Shabwani Elite forces, the latter allegedly with the support of the UAE. On 22 January, al-Zubaidi, the STC president, had demanded that Hadi sack Prime Minister Ahmed bin Daghr, citing corruption and mismanagement. Declaring a state of emergency, al-Zubaidi threatened to topple the government by force.

Six days later, Security Belt forces – apparently with support from Elite Force units from Shabwa – entered into a pitched battle with Hadi's Presidential Guard for control of Aden, which only ended after mediation led by Saudi Arabia. STC contacts describe the clashes as being part of a wider strategy to have STC-approved officials included in the government, and hence to have a role in governance and the UN-led peace process (this is yet another worrying sign that a major lesson learned by Yemeni groups since 2011 is that the best way to achieve political recognition is through the use of force).⁵² If this were to happen it would likely be viewed as legitimizing the movement. Thus, the government has explicitly said that it will not be bullied into naming officials – as it feels it was pressured to do in 2014 after the Houthi seizure of Sana'a.

Regardless of the outcome, the events of January should lend a new urgency to the efforts by Yemeni and foreign officials to produce a more inclusive peace process.

Given the multitude of groups participating in the conflict, bending to STC pressure would only create a perverse set of incentives, according to a government official. 'If we do what they want now then the Salafis and the Marebis and the Islahis will all be asking where their place is, and that is no way to make a government.'⁵³

Regardless of the outcome, the events of January should lend a new urgency to the efforts by Yemeni and foreign officials to produce a more inclusive peace process. To date, the approach of the UN and the international community has been to focus on resolving the national-level civil war, on the basis that broader issues can be dealt with only once there is a ceasefire. In effect, this means groups currently excluded from talks will have to wait for a second phase in the peace process. But, with the UN-led effort stalled since late 2016 and numerous conflicts within the conflict looming, a new approach is needed.

⁵² Author's interview via messaging app, February 2018.

⁵³ Author's interview in Washington, DC, January 2018.

In October 2017, Chatham House hosted a two-day conference under the Chatham House rule in Jordan for senior Western policymakers, Yemeni officials and public figures, as well as Yemeni and international analysts and individuals from Gulf-based research centres. Much of the content of this paper was presented and discussed during the meeting. Policymakers present conceded that, while there was general recognition of its importance, the south had largely been designated a low priority issue, with few resources devoted to the southern question. 'The south has generally been the last line item or thereabouts in bilateral meetings, so the box is ticked to say it has been discussed,' said one Western policymaker. The south, another said, takes up at most 5 per cent of all discussions on Yemen.

Policymakers and analysts also generally agreed that knowledge of contemporary dynamics in the south lagged far behind that of key groups in the north. In particular, several Western officials expressed surprise at the extent of the UAE's involvement in the south and support for armed groups. There was little awareness of the potential flashpoints in Aden, Shabwa and Hadramawt, or of the important role of Salafist groups. Given the mounting accusations of abuse in detention facilities run by UAE-backed groups – and the apparent strength of the US–Emirati counterterrorism partnership in the south – policymakers would clearly benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the current situation when communicating with the UAE on these issues.

Participants agreed that the tools available for mediation with the south were limited. There has been some movement on Track Two initiatives, bringing together civil society leaders, including those representing women's groups, members of the business community and some politicians. But these are not at a sufficiently advanced stage to act as mechanisms for internal dialogue across the south, or to create a bridge between key southern groups and the top-level UN-led mediation process.⁵⁴ The office of the UN special envoy has appointed political officers to work on the southern issue and plans to open an office in Aden, but its work is at an incipient phase and is constrained by the perceived need for sequencing of different dialogues around Yemen.⁵⁵

Another key issue for policymakers is how to strike a balance between localism and the maintenance of central state institutions. Participants agreed that NGOs, international organizations, including the UN, and foreign governments would need to work with local actors with a proven track record of project implementation to obtain results in the short term. Attempts to implement projects through the government have been repeatedly stymied by weak capacity and, arguably, a lack of will to execute projects that do not directly benefit the government. If local NGOs were given the majority of the external funding, some participants argued, state institutions that are already weakened by the conflict would likely be further eroded.

Finally, participants agreed that discussions on the south could not be postponed for another year if the broader political process did not move forward. They agreed on the following set of recommendations.

⁵⁴ The UN process is currently focused on brokering a deal between the northwestern Houthis–Saleh alliance and the Saudi-backed Hadi government, rather than the broad array of groups fighting one another and in control of territory on the ground.

⁵⁵ The office of the UN special envoy has argued that, given that the key issue for southerners is the structure of the state, discussions on the southern question can only begin as part of a new dialogue after a national-level accord has been agreed upon.

1. A new international approach – recommendations for foreign governments, working under the umbrella of the UN process

- Move the south up on the list of state-level and international priorities, and ensure that more time is devoted to discussions of the south during bilateral and multilateral meetings.
- Increase engagement across the board at the local level with key southern leaders, NGOs and civil society organizations, including women's groups.
- Work to develop the capacity of southern civil society.
- Work to engage the UAE and Saudi Arabia on key southern issues, particularly that of armed groups, on a regular basis.

2. Addressing the issue of armed groups – recommendations for international organizations and foreign governments, working under the umbrella of the UN process

- Form a working group on security in the south that includes key coalition players (Saudi Arabia and the UAE).
- Work towards the formation of an inclusive coordination mechanism that can assist in the construction of security institutions – particularly policing – and that ensure accountability and the rule of law.
- Consider how this institution can provide the basis for centralization of security.
- Assess areas where activity (e.g. coastguard training) has been duplicated and harmonize different initiatives.
- Work to increase the capacity of local courts and the police force to deal with legal disputes and other legal issues, as well as empowering the interior ministry to more stringently oversee prisons.
- Work to reduce potential conflict flashpoints, including in Aden, Hadramawt and Shabwa through 'deconfliction' initiatives.

3. Research and outreach – recommendations for think-tanks, international organizations and foreign governments

- Work towards better international coordination on policy related to the south by co-funding research on the region.
- Increase the international presence in Aden and the south, with the office of the UN special envoy leading the way.
- Support existing and new research centres, either in the south or led by southerners, following the example of the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies and Deepthroat, both Yemeni-run research and policy centres.
- Work towards identifying and analysing all key actors, in order to improve understanding of governorate-level and regional dynamics.
- Work to improve southern actors' understanding of the international community and their capacity for dialogue.

During the transitional period of 2012–14, foreign officials were slow to adjust to shifting power dynamics in Yemen. They prioritized conventional domestic level politics and counterterrorism, and on maintaining President Hadi's position. As a result, many foreign officials developed blind spots when it came to emerging issues or those perceived as being second-tier, to which they did not apportion a great deal of significance. The Houthis were beneficiaries of this myopia. As a result, they were on the outskirts of Sana'a before many external parties recognized the threat the Houthis posed.

The south represents a very different set of policy issues than those raised by the actions of the Houthis, but there is a lesson to be learned from the transitional period. Failure to recognize the importance of the south to Yemen's future stability and security will only lead to a far messier problem in the years ahead. Without energetic moves towards better research, outreach, and policy formation, the broader civil war looks all too likely to devolve into a series of 'small wars', first among them being the struggle for control of the south.

About the Author

This paper was primarily researched, written and produced by **Peter Salisbury**, a senior consulting fellow with Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Programme, between August 2017 and February 2018. Peter also researched and produced the accompanying digital map of Yemen's 'chaos state' (<https://yemen-map.chathamhouse.org>), which was updated as part of this paper. The former energy editor at the *Middle East Economic Digest*, Peter has been working on political economy issues in the MENA region since 2008. He has written as a journalist for *The Economist*, the *Financial Times* and *Foreign Policy*; and has consulted to the UK's Department for International Development, the United Nations and the World Bank on political economy studies; and has helped produce a number of films for VICE, a youth-oriented media network, including the award-winning television series, *TERROR*.

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Cover image: Ships destroyed during fighting for Aden in 2015, Mualla Port, Aden, February 2016.

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