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# The View from Aden: A Shadow State between the Coalition and Civil War

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Fire and smoke in an oil storage tank at the main oil refinery in Aden, Yemen, January 2019 © Najeeb Almahboobi/EPA EFE



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Four years into the war that engulfed Aden since March 2015, the city in the South of Yemen might look tranquil and safe in the eyes of foreign observers as the interim capital of the internationally recognized government of Abd Rabou Mansour Hadi. To its inhabitants, however, it is a satellite out of orbit with no institutions or a state to govern or uphold the rule of law and where civilians face many challenges daily.

Civilians were relieved, in July 2015, when Popular Resistance Forces (a mix of different factions from Aden, independent, Salafists, reformers and followers of many factions from the Southern Movement) and forces of the Arab Coalition (led by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirate, UAE), defeated the Saleh-Houthi forces, expelling them from the city. They began to dream of a normal life and a fresh start for real institutions that will build a modern civilian state and remedy their decades long suffering, exclusion, marginalization, and inability to run their own city. Simultaneously, fighters raised the flags of Saudi Arabia and UAE along with the flag of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. Meanwhile, elements loyal to the Southern Movement renewed their demands of secession of Southern Yemen from the North.

These hopes died shortly after, however. The mandate of the interim government intertwined with that of the National Council, and so did the interests of the Coalition states that sponsor these two bodies. As a result, Aden slipped into a state of insecurity with a multiplicity of armed militias and widespread corruption.

This paper seeks to describe the fragmentation process of the Yemeni State, four years after the Coalition's offensive to restore legitimate authority. It highlights the practices of Abd Rabou Mansour Hadi and his government in running the country and how rivalry between Saudi Arabia and its ally, the UAE, translated, on the ground, in the form of a contest for authority between the Interim Yemeni Government and the Transition Southern Council. The paper also highlights corruption, insecurity, and the rise of civilian protests against the status quo in Aden.

## **An interim capital and an absent president**

Today, Aden looks exhausted. Ruin and destruction in the city stand witness to the



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Yemeni Government's failure to restore the situation to what it was before the war. President Hadi cannot even take the decision to return to the interim capital of the country he governs and remains at the head of this hybrid authority seven years into his presidential term – one that was supposed to last no more than two years. The 74-years old man, who fled Sanaa to Aden, then to Riyadh through Muscat in March 2015, is still running the Yemeni presidential institution from Riyadh.

Many questioned Hadi's ability to continue as an interim president of Yemen for the first two years, under the terms of the GCC Initiative that brought him as an elected reconciliation president on 25 March 2012. However, he continues to run the country from his exile, leaving his prime minister with a handful of ministers to run the government travelling between Aden and Riyadh. Most of those ministers and their families live outside Yemen.<sup>1</sup>

One day after the assassination of Jaafar Mohammed Saad, the former governor of Aden, on 6 December 2015, Hadi appointed Aidarous al-Zubaidi as his successor. He also appointed Shalal Shae'e as Aden's Head of Security Department. These appointments took no more than one day. Hadi returned to Aden and, on 4 January 2016, visited, together with city's governor and head of security, the Aden Harbor, which stayed out of service for a long time despite its international strategic importance. They welcomed the signalling of a new beginning between Abyen (Hadi's hometown), and Dhale (al-Zubaidi and Shae'e's town), both of which did not take part in the liberation of Aden.<sup>2</sup> Shortly afterwards, Hadi left Aden to settle in Riyadh.

Hadi's visit and his new appointments did nothing to improve the situation in Aden, which went from bad to worse. The events that shook the city in late 2018 are one example of the ongoing deterioration, with no signs of a positive turn on the horizon, and nothing to prevent the recurrence of violence. On the contrary, there is news spreading about a build-up of force by different factions heralding possible new clashes.

## A shadow state and a fractured authority



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The presidency and its institutions are nowhere to be seen in Aden except in a small remote coastal area at Ma`ashiq, Crater province, where the presidential palace is. Ma`ashiq is a well-fortified strategic location at the far end of the mountainous Huqat area, overlooking the sea, and guarded by a Saudi-UAE Coalition forces. The Yemeni government also relies for its security on the military forces of the Presidential Protection Brigades, which control some camps across several provinces in the city and are led by Hadi's son, Major General Nasser. The young Major General avoids the media just like his brother Galal, who also takes part in running the country from the shadows.

The government shares its authority with the Interim Council, which in turn controls another group of camps across many provinces in the city, with support from the Security Belt Brigades that aided it in its attempted *coup* against the government in late January 2018.

In such a landscape, the statelessness of Aden appears almost permanent. Nobody knows when it will end or when the president will be able to return from Riyadh. It looks as if Hadi grew accustomed to this situation and is happy to keep things unchanged. His official discourse in running the presidency underlines the need to preserve Yemen's unity, security and territorial integrity and to work towards creating a federal Yemen along the lines of the National Dialogue outputs and the GCC Initiative, with the support of UN Security Council Resolution No. 2216.

Despite its unifying discourse, Hadi's administration is suffering from numerous heavy challenges and even heavier pressures. It is under the control of the Islah (Islamist) Party, and Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar, the Vice-President and Supreme Commander of the Yemeni Army. There is also a growing influence of the cluster of power formed by Hadi's two sons, Galal and Nasser, to the extent that the presidency has become an institution in support of Hadi as a "permanent" president of Yemen.

In running the country, the presidency is also involved in bad management. It ignored the terms and conditions of the national state strategy on appointments, salaries, and remunerations of state employees. With the misuse of power, everything came under the control of an absent-present president with no serious opposition or an effective state monitoring and accountability authority. By



breaching the terms and conditions of the national state strategy, it has become clear that Hadi's policy of running the institutions of the presidency follows in the footsteps of Ali Abdullah Saleh's, one that is built on the absolute loyalty to one person, the president.<sup>3</sup>

### An administration in Saleh's footsteps

To understand the mechanism by which state authority turned into a tool to consolidate power in the hands of Hadi and his loyalists, it is important to look at the different appointments he made within the presidential institution, the Shoura Council, and the Cabinet as well as the appointments of presidential advisors, governors, ambassadors, attachés, and others. Presidential appointments reached even Aden University, which sees unprecedented levels of corruption.<sup>4</sup>

For instance, the president's office is today run by Abdullah al-Elimy, appointed by Hadi in violation of the standards and criteria for the appointments of senior government officials. Al-Elimy, born in 1979, jumped suddenly to the fore of the Yemeni political scene in 2011 as a young member of the Islah Party who used to give inspirational speeches in protest gatherings. In 2012, he was appointed as Head of the Local Authority and NGOs Department in the presidential office. After three years, he was appointed in 2015 as deputy head of the presidential office, only to become head of this office in 2016. It is noteworthy that the official Yemeni news agency, Saba, operating from Riyadh, describes al-Elimy as an official with a doctoral degree, while his professional resumé shows that he acquired a bachelor degree in Medicine from Aden University and a Master's degree in Administration and Health Economy from Malaysia, and was a teaching assistant at Aden University.

Over the last few months, Saba has also started to promote Ahmed Saleh al-Eissi, a controversial businessman born in 1968 in Abyen, as the deputy head of the presidential office. No information is available as to whether al-Eissi holds any university degrees. However, he is known as the most prominent oil businessman in Yemen, owning many oil companies. He also owns the Balqis Airways Company, Aden Sky News Channel, and heads the National Football Union.



### **A corruption-laden and lawless land**

Against this backdrop, everything looks totally on the loose. The rule of law is absent, and the judiciary is no longer the proper mechanism for achieving justice.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforced disappearances and torture became a widespread practice. The hit-and-run killings and assassinations that marked Aden during the post-2015 war became part of the city's daily life, although they have become less frequent in recent months. Light and semi-heavy weapons are available in the hands of ordinary citizens who found themselves under the mercy of brigades and armed militias, comprising a rough mix of extremists, thugs, and former prisoners, who operate outside state control.

Aden inhabitants' daily struggle to secure a livelihood has been made more difficult because of rising unemployment, mounting levels of poverty, and frenzied hikes in the prices of most food items, the collapse of the currency, and a decrease in the salaries of civil servants.<sup>5</sup> In the absence of an effective anti-corruption authority, corruption reached unprecedented levels. The city is also witnessing a big increase in drug trafficking, under the protection of influential figures who would not hesitate to kill anyone who probes or challenges their activities.

During a visit to Aden on 3 March 2019, British Foreign Minister Jeremy Hunt raised the alarm about the situation in the city, when he warned that “[w]e have one last chance for the success of Stockholm Peace Process. The process could die in a few weeks if we do not see to the commitment of all sides to act upon their Stockholm engagements.”

### **The Saudi-UAE rivalry over Aden**

Despite its obvious weakness, it was clear the Yemeni government can continue over time. It was also clear that the UAE-backed armed Interim Southern Council is unable to achieve secession. The UAE established the Interim Southern Council in May 2017 in response to Hadi's decision to remove Aidrous al-Zubaidi as Aden governor the previous month. It continues to support and finance Al-Zubaidi through the provision of salaries and benefits and deals with him as a President



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allowing him to act as an alternative government. Bolstered by the UAE support, the Interim Southern Council tried from 28 to 30 January 2018 to stage a coup against the Interim Yemeni Government, which killed 50 people and injured a hundred.<sup>6</sup>

The UAE controls Aden through the Interim Council, and the Security Belt Brigades that it established after the March 2015 war. Although it is part of the Arab Coalition and its official line is to support Yemen's unity and integrity, the UAE position on the ground shows its backing for the secession of the South from the North. Indeed, the UAE seeks to change the situation on the ground by empowering the Interim Council and supporting its presence outside Yemeni borders via the establishment of a headquarters in Abu Dhabi and offices in several other countries.

A number of ministers in the Yemeni Cabinet said the UAE is preventing them from fulfilling their functions in Aden. Among those to speak out about this were Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, Ahmed al-Maysary (from Abyen), and Minister of Transportation Saleh al-Jabwani (From Shabwa). The latter accused the UAE of wanting to form militias that work outside the control of the Yemeni state. Many ministers and officials are also banned from returning to Aden.

## Protests and local civil movements

The situation reached a climax in September 2018 when protesters took to the streets across several provinces in Aden. They tried to impose civil disobedience after they lost hope in a real change that will alleviate their daily suffering. They chanted slogans against the Yemeni government and the Interim Council and demanded the removal of the Arab Coalition. They burned the UAE flag and pictures of many of its leaders and called for “freedom from occupation and control of their harbours and airports”, and “a life with dignity and independence in Yemen”. Nonetheless, protests gradually lost their momentum and died down when the Interim Southern Council tried to control the movement, claiming that it wants to reform and protect it. Civil disobedience turned into acts of violence and armed banditry by masked militants.

To appease the situation, the Yemeni government declared that it will take



measures to ensure food provisions and services. It also promised to review the operations of its security divisions and work towards ensuring human security and solve the problems of airports and harbours and restore traffic.

On 15 October 2018, Hadi removed the head of the Cabinet, Ahmed Bin Daghr, and referred him for investigation on charges of “negligence that was an integral part of governmental performance [...] in economic and services-related areas, and its faltering performance”. He also held him responsible for “the government’s failure to take the necessary measures to confront the Laban Hurricane that swept the al-Muhra governorate”. He appointed Minister of Transportation Maeen Abdulmalek as new Prime Minister but kept all other ministers.

Over the last few months, calls demanding official government position for people from the city start to be heard but remain weak in the general political context of Yemen to be a force to reckon with. It is noteworthy that a large number of these groups are satisfied with Aden’s situation in the draft constitution of Federal Yemen, as it is consistent with their goals and ambition to run the city themselves, according to Articles 273-277 of the draft.

“Achieving our goals, that Aden remains a city for civilians operating according to the rule of law and order, hinges foremost on the youth of the city, males and females”, says Tarek Muhammad Abdallah, a 70-year old lawyer and a prominent figure from Aden, and one of the main supporters of such civic groups in Aden. “This will mainly happen through organizing ourselves in one big umbrella group that will be inclusive of all the people of Aden. What will unify these parties is the effort of everyone towards the public interest, instead of competing to achieve personal goals or politicized interests”, he concludes.

## **A consensus in Stockholm, with obstacles on the ground**

In late January 2018, the Panel of Experts on Yemen sent a letter to the UN Security Council with their report about the situation in Yemen. The report stated that the legitimate government of Yemen “was eroded to the extent that it became doubtful to restore Yemen to the way it was as a unified country”. According to the



report, “Yemen is now a group of statelets instead of a single state.”

Taking this report’s conclusion into account, it is important to integrate the consensus achieved by the UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, in Stockholm on 13 December 2018, between the Yemeni government under Hadi, on one hand, and the Houthi rebels, on the other hand. It was clear that – if successful – the UN-sponsored Stockholm agreement was paving the way to further talks that will eventually lead to a political solution within the framework of a unified Yemen.

Griffith had earlier stressed that “the question of the future of the South is not on the agenda of the current talks. It will be part of a Yemeni discussion during the transitional period. We discussed this with the Southerners, and we made it clear to all stakeholders, and they agree”. Moreover, Griffith confirmed that “as the UN envoy, I believe in the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security of all states. These are UN values. We do not support secession [...] unless it is the output of a consensual process undertaken by the member state. Therefore, we are of the opinion that values the unity of Yemen, and it is indeed important. If Yemen witnesses secession today, that will have catastrophic repercussions.”

Stockholm Agreement includes the agreement of all parties to the following:

- An agreement on the city of Hodeida and the ports of Hodeida, Salif and Ras Issa,
- an executive mechanism on activating the prisoner exchange agreement,
- a statement of understanding on Taiz.

The Stockholm Agreement also requires all parties

- To fully implement this Agreement and to work towards the removal of any obstructions or impediments to its implementation.
- To refrain from any action, escalation or decisions that would undermine the prospects for full implementation of this Agreement.
- To continue the consultations unconditionally in January 2019 in a location to be agreed upon by the parties.



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Time passed without achieving substantial progress. Every party to the conflict is accusing the other of standing in the way of reaching an agreement, let alone pressures from the Interim Southern Council for secession. This led the UNSC to hold a session on 4 February 2019, when it called on all parties to urgently cooperate with the Head of the redeployment coordination committee and the UN Mission for supporting the Hodeida agreement so as not to delay implementing the plan on the redeployment of armed forces in Hodeida, its harbour, al-Sulaif, and Ras Eisa. The Security Council confirmed “the need to achieve progress in reaching a comprehensive political agreement on the conflict in Yemen, according to the resolutions and statements by the UN Security Council, the GCC initiative, and the National Dialogue outputs.”

The statement of the UNSC that “members reconfirmed their strong commitment to the unity, sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Yemen”, conveys a clear message to conflict parties in Yemen and to its decision-makers as a roadmap for reaching a political solution for this devastated country. The situation on the ground, however, runs a different course, one summed up in the report of the UN Experts Group on Yemen confirmed in their letter: “political decision-makers from different sides are not feeling the heat of war that Yemeni civilians suffer.”



## Endnotes

1. The position of the prime minister was taken by many in Hadi's government: Mohamed Salim Basindawa (10 October 2011 – 21 September 2014); Khaled Bahah (13 October 2014 – 3 April 2016); Ahmed Bin Daghr (3 April 2016 – 15 October 2018); Maeen Abdulmalek (15 October 2018 – present).
2. Abyen and Dhale witnessed a bloody struggle for power in the context of the 13 January 1986 events, during the period of totalitarian rule imposed by the Socialist Party that ruled South Yemen.
3. The National State Strategy for appointments, salaries, and remunerations in the administrative apparatus of the state and its institutions codified a set of criteria for senior-level state appointments, including expertise, technical capacity, and problem-solving and decision-making skills.
4. In 2016, Hadi appointed Lakhdar Lasour (from Abyen) president of Aden University, in violation to the national strategy on appointments, salaries and remunerations. According to the strategy, university presidents are appointed by a presidential decision based on suggestions from the head of the Supreme Council of Universities and the Minister of Higher Education. The appointed university president should have a PhD or equivalent, if he is a medical doctor, with 10 years of tenure and expertise in academic and administrative work in a recognized university. The appointment shall be for five years, and renewable for one term only.
5. Civil servants on a medium degree of seniority, after a raise of 30%, get a salary of around 90,000 Yemeni Riyal (approx. US0). An academic in Aden University gets a salary of around 250,000 YR (approx. US6). The soldier's salary in the Security Belt Brigades is around 1000 Saudi Riyal (approx. US6). On the other hand, leaders of these brigades get so much more than these rates, in addition to other benefits.
6. We might also read this *coup* as a renewed struggle for power between Abyen and al-Dali`, along with various territorial alignments related to this struggle.



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## About Arab Reform Initiative

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- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

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