

The Southern Issue in Yemen: Hopes and Challenges

by [Ali Said al-Ahmadi \(/experts/ali-said-al-ahmadi\)](/experts/ali-said-al-ahmadi)

Sep 16, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alqdyt-aljnwbyt-amal-wthdyat\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alqdyt-aljnwbyt-amal-wthdyat)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ali Said al-Ahmadi \(/experts/ali-said-al-ahmadi\)](/experts/ali-said-al-ahmadi)

Ali Said al-Ahmadi is a southern Yemeni journalist.



Brief Analysis

The 2014 National Dialogue Conference allowed for ample discussion of the southern issue in Yemen. Now, all sides must help implement the solutions outlined there and in the more recent Riyadh Agreement to ensure that a just solution to the southern issue is achieved.

On January 25, 2014, Yemenis concluded the National Dialogue Conference, which had lasted more than ten months. During the conference, representatives of varying political and social forces discussed the most complex issues and crises from which Yemen suffers, at the forefront of which is the Southern issue. The Conference, half of whose members were southerners, resulted in a document of national consensus which enjoyed broad international endorsement and support. This was exemplified by UN Security Council resolutions and statements reflecting an international consensus on Yemen. Among the most important of them was Resolution 2140, which was adopted weeks after the conclusion of the NDC, and which, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, contained sanctions against those who obstruct the political process.

The National Dialogue Conference created ample space for discussion of the Southern issue and addressed it from all the aspects that matter to southern citizens, thus turning it from merely the issue of a faction that lost power into the issue of an entire population in all its diversity. In the rounds of discussion regarding this topic, which was considered one of the most important of those raised by the NDC, participants included politicians and factions of various constituents from across the range of political phases through which the South has passed. Attention was devoted to investigating the roots of the issue, and the views of a variety of southern and national constituents and factions were taken into account.

Through the sponsorship of the President of the Republic of Yemen, the support of the United Nations, and the wisdom and perseverance of the participants, the National Dialogue Conference successfully developed solutions to the Southern issue that represented the best that Yemen's political minds had to offer. A draft was formulated for a civil, federal state that would guarantee the rights of all citizens, northern and southern.

As for the south, the National Dialogue Conference successfully devised solutions and guarantees by drafting a civil, federal state to fulfill the three most important demands of the southerners, which are as follows:

1. Dealing with errors made by the unity government that the Saleh regime assembled following the 1994 civil war. The outcomes of the National Dialogue return southern Yemen to the heart of the national partnership through 50/50 parity with the north in all supreme powers of the State.
2. Establishing a multi-regional, federal system to give the southern governorates the right to partnership in wealth and power, a right of which they had been deprived since 1967.
3. Addressing the problem of exclusion and the accumulated effects of southern conflicts. This was achieved through the conference's recognition of the principles of national reconciliation and transitional justice, and by laying foundations from which to build a civil, pluralistic system across all levels of government: wilayat, regional, and central.

Yet the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference did not come to fruition: the Houthis, with the support of Iran and an alliance with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, carried out a military coup to resist the NDC's outcomes. In September 2014, they overthrew the state institutions in the capital, Sanaa, and seized control of most of the regions of the north, spanning to the city of Aden in the south. The legitimate leadership confronted this situation with the support of the Popular Resistance and by summoning a broad, Saudi-led Arab coalition in March 2015. With the help of this coalition, the Popular Resistance succeeded in driving out the Houthi militias from Aden and the other southern governorates within four months.

President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi was largely responsive to southern constituents who had not previously accepted the outcomes of the Dialogue. He tried to integrate them into the political process and include their leadership in power by giving them seats in the government. He also handed over to them administration of the temporary capital of Aden and several other governorates, with the goal of fulfilling the project of a federalized Yemeni state starting from the southern governorates all the way to liberation of the capital, Sanaa.

However, things did not proceed as planned. No sooner had 2016 ended than disputes began to emerge between the Yemeni government and some partners within the coalition, in particular the United Arab Emirates. Liberated regions became an arena for polarization and conflict between the legitimate government and one of its allies. In these conditions the Southern Transitional Council formed with full Emirati support. Since its founding in May 2017, the STC has essentially become the political front for illegal military formations in the southern governorates. It has plunged the south into a new vortex of conflict which peaked in August 2019, when the legitimate government was driven out of Aden and troops of the Southern Transitional Council attempted to extend eastward towards Abyan, Shabwah, and Hadhramaut. However, they were overwhelmed and retreated to their barricades in the capital, Aden, as well as parts of the Abyan, Lahij, and Dhale governorates.

As the leader of the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen, Saudi Arabia found itself faced with this situation in which one of the two sides was a member state of the coalition. Saudi Arabia invited the legitimate government and the Southern Transitional Council to a dialogue which resulted in a political and military agreement signed in Riyadh in November 2019. Per the agreement, the STC would withdraw its troops from Aden in exchange for being able to participate in the legitimate government and deliberations for a political solution.

The joint committees responsible for implementing the Riyadh Agreement were stymied, as the Southern Transitional Council withdrew from fulfilling the military component. With that, the two sides entered into armed confrontation once again, with the Abyan Governorate seeing bloody battles which did not prove decisive for either side. Then, events escalated on the strategic Socotra Island, leading to the island falling into the hands of Southern Transitional Council forces and falling out of the legitimate government's control.

Saudi mediation returned once more with a step called the "Mechanism to Accelerate Implementation of the Riyadh

Agreement,” which the legitimate government accepted. It involved appointing a governor and security director for Aden Governorate from among Transitional Council candidates, in exchange for Saudi guarantees that the military component would be carried out, the Southern Transitional Council forces would leave Aden, and the conditions on Socotra Island would return to how they were a month earlier. Following this, a government would be formed in which the STC would participate.

Now, entering into September, the agreement’s time limit has ended without any progress on the military and security fronts nor on Socotra Island. This complicates the situation and poses new challenges for both Saudi and Yemeni leadership. They must succeed in carrying out the Riyadh Agreement, forming a government and returning it to Aden, or else they will face a crisis that encompasses all of Yemen, due to the deterioration of Yemen’s economy as well as public health, education, and other service sectors. On top of this is the proliferation of armed, extrajudicial entities which threaten the country’s stability and security. All these factors create an environment in which violent groups and terrorism can operate in the absence of state institutions. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)