IRAQ: EXTERNAL ACTIONS AGAINST PMF THREATEN DELICATE BALANCE

Brian Perkins

Iraq remains in an extremely precarious position after declaring victory over Islamic State (IS) in December 2017, and regional tensions continue to upset the local balance of power. Iraq relies heavily on the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—a coalition of paramilitary groups—to supplement the capabilities of the formal Iraqi military and keep a seemingly resurgent IS at bay. Among these paramilitary groups are several with close ties to Iran, making them a source of suspicion for Sunni groups across the country as well as Israel, the United States, and other Western nations. While the strength and influence of the PMF has caused turmoil in Iraq, they do serve an essential security function at a pivotal time for Iraq when increased instability could have dire consequences.

The PMF's role in Iraq has left the country delicately balanced on the verge of regression, and external meddling by those seeking to pressure Iran threatens to push the country back to the brink. Suspicious airstrikes against PMF bases—purportedly conducted by Israel,

but also blamed on the United States—have further soured U.S. relations with the PMF and the formal Iraqi bureaucracy. The strikes have also stressed the relationship between the latter two groups, which need to maintain a strong partnership to maintain Iraq's internal security (Aljazeera, August 21).

Despite Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi's efforts to rein in the PMF and integrate them into the formal Iraqi security establishment, the PMF has continued to chart its own path, with unconfirmed reports regarding the alleged formation of its own air force. Additionally, the Fatah Coalition, which represents the PMF in Parliament, has called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces (Radio Farda, September 6; Aljazeera, August 27).

The increased tension among the various internal and external forces responsible for preventing IS from resurging has come amid increased activity by the international terrorist group. Iraqi forces have continued to detect and disrupt substantial IS cells and have destroyed countless tunnels used for smuggling across a significant number of provinces. Meanwhile, IS has claimed responsibility for countless bombings in Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Mosul, among others (Kurdistan24, August 22; Iraqi News, September 9). Many of the arrests

and successful strikes against IS have stemmed from U.S. intelligence or involved the PMF ([Iraqi News](#), September 2; [Kurdisatan24](#), September 9).

While there is understandably a need to limit Iranian influence in Iraq, there is a delicate balance that must be struck. Unilateral actions taken by foreign militaries undermines security partnerships between the formal Iraqi security apparatus and external powers, while also undermining the Iraqi government and their essential partnership with the PMF. Meanwhile, military actions taken against the PMF hinder their ability to help secure Iraq, inflame preexisting local tensions, and risk retaliatory attacks against key Iraqi allies.

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BANGLADESH: ISLAMIC STATE CLAIMED ATTACKS AND VIDEO HIGHLIGHT CONTINUED THREAT

Brian Perkins

The threat of terrorist attacks in Bangladesh has remarkably decreased following a massive crackdown by security forces after the Islamic State (IS) launched a series of deadly attacks in Dhaka in 2016. Security forces have largely managed to disrupt terrorist organizations or at least force them into hiding. However, the government seems to have been lulled into complacency by the sharp reduction in terrorism over the past few years despite evidence that IS-affiliated or inspired actors have grown increasingly active in the country and are making a broader regional push.

Despite its noticeable successes, Bangladeshi security operations have not entirely removed the threat. Instead, it has displaced the terrorist group Jamaat al-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) to neighboring India while forcing smaller less cohesive groups, including IS-inspired individuals, underground. Simultaneously, government policies have continued to increase radicalization and foster anti-government sentiment.

IS had not claimed responsibility for an attack in Bangladesh for almost three years, but over the past several months the terrorist group has conducted multiple attacks. While the attacks have not been particularly devastating, they indicate a noticeable shift from the group's previous operations in that they have primarily targeted police forces, rather than civilians. The latest attack occurred on August 31, when an explosive device detonated near police vehicles assigned to a Bangladeshi minister's security detail in Dhaka, injuring two police officers ([Daily Star](#), September 2). An investigation is underway, but authorities have yet to identify the assailants. The attack and targeting of police officials follows the August 9 release of a video depicting Bangladeshi IS fighters vowing to attack security officials and renewing their pledge to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The video was released as part of the ongoing series "The Best Outcome is for the Pious" in which IS branches around the world have renewed allegiance to the IS leader.

Government officials seem sharply divided regarding the IS threat. Many officials have used the fact that the attacks have been relatively low-tech to deny an IS presence in the country, with Information Minister Hasam

Mahmud stating, "there is nothing called IS in Bangladesh. IS claims responsibility when a tire of a vehicle explodes" ([Dhaka Tribune](), September 1). Meanwhile, other government and security officials feel that the recent incidents are likely test cases for larger, more sophisticated attacks in the future, noting that militants are very much still active throughout the country, though they are keeping a low profile.

The disconnect between government policymakers and Bangladesh's security forces is particularly concerning as security officials have noted a rise in radicalization and are still regularly dismantling cells operated by the IS-aligned Neo-JMB. Unlike the terrorist attacks prior to the government crackdown, recent attacks have highlighted a shift toward less coordinated attacks, which security forces have noticeably had trouble disrupting. With the obvious decentralization of militant cells occurring in the country, particularly in Dhaka, it is likely only a matter of time before a more notable attack takes place.

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Islamic State Operations Room: Lebanon Prison Radicalization

Andrew Devereux

On the evening of June 3, a gunman killed two police officers and two members of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) in Tripoli. The assailant, identified posthumously as Lebanese national Abdel Rahman Mabsout, opened fire and threw explosives at two security positions while riding a motorcycle, before retreating to a residential building. When the military attempted to siege the apartment complex, Mabsout detonated an explosive vest, killing himself [(Gulf News, June 4)]().

Subsequent to the attack, Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Bou Saab confirmed that Mabsout had traveled to Syria to fight under the banner of the Islamic State (IS), and spent 18 months in the infamous Roumieh prison charged with terrorism offenses, before being released in late 2017 [(Al Manar, June 4)](). Although little is known about Mabsout's past prior to his attempts to join IS, his time in prison clearly did not weaken or nullify his jihadist beliefs, and the attack demonstrated inherent structural weaknesses within the wider Lebanese judicial system.

The IS Operations Room

In January 2015, then-Interior Minister Nihad Mashnouq stated that Roumieh prison, located in Matn district east of Beirut, was an "operations room" for IS, after a raid by the security forces revealed the prison was being used as an ad-hoc staging ground by Islamist detainees linked to Fatah al-Islam, al-Qaeda, and IS ([Asharq Al-Aswat,]() January 12, 2015). Despite this revelation, few long-term structural upgrades were made, and Roumieh remains an incubation chamber for jihadism.

Out of almost 3,400 inmates in Roumieh, just over 1,000 have been convicted, with the rest awaiting trial ([Asharq Al-Aswat,]() November 15, 2018). Of the overall prison population, at least 1,200 are being held on terror-related charges ([Arab News,]() June 4). Owing to the slow nature of convictions, overcrowding, and substandard humanitarian conditions, numerous groups are calling for trials to be expedited or amnesties issued to certain detainees. In Lebanon, there is no system to classify or

separate inmates based upon crimes; in Roumieh, prisoners are classified as 'Islamist' or 'non-Islamists', but these categorizations are based upon little evidence and extremists are free to interact with other inmates.

Roumieh itself is just a microcosm of the problems facing the Lebanese judicial system, especially when it comes to cases of Islamist extremism. Questions have been raised about the length of Mabsout's sentence. There are no international processes in place to help domestic courts determine the extent of Mabsout's crimes in Syria. With no formal method of concluding whether Mabsout was operationally active or committed actions tantamount to war crimes, he was only convicted of joining a foreign terrorist organization and served a reduced sentence.

These structural failures breed not just radicalization, but anti-state malaise, with the two often coalescing. The targeting of state-level security forces by Mabsout was likely deliberate. Allegations that the security forces, over which Hezbollah holds significant influence, deliberately target members of the Sunni community despite limited evidence of militant activity have furthered resentment of the state. Accusations of torture are commonplace, while convictions can be deliberately delayed. There was an influx of Sunni prisoners from 2014-2017 following a series of attacks on the Lebanese security forces, who reciprocally conducted a significant sweep of any suspected Sunni militants (The National, June 22). Members of the Sunni community claim the crackdown and subsequent neglect of Sunni detainees was disproportionate, fostering anti-state animosity.

Ideological Hardening

Mabsout demonstrated the results of ideological hardening. Two distinct factors can strengthen an individual's ideological belief in jihadism—time in Syria within IS' self-declared caliphate and exposure to other extremists while incarcerated. While the practical deficiencies of Roumieh prison are not enough alone to foster radicalization, mixing with other jihadists, some of whom are experienced jihadist imams, can reinforce extremist views.

The lack of separation between inmates means those convicted for fairly minor criminal charges can be exposed to radical Islam; becoming part of a jihadist group can be appealing to former Sunni moderates attempting to find a purpose in life. It has been noted that anyone who enters Roumieh is a potential new terrorist

(The National, June 22). Current Interior Minister Raya al-Hassan has called for structural reforms to prison and military detention centers, including rehabilitation strategies and reviews of classification procedures (Al-Monitor, May 10). In reality, such reforms are years away from implementation and are not far-reaching enough to fix the issues of overcrowding, radicalization and discrimination.

Little assistance exists for ex-detainees, which can further perceptions of discrimination and state-level neglect. No program exists to aid the transition back into normal life, and ex-detainees can find it hard to find work, while their access to a passport is restricted. In addition, there is a lack of post-release surveillance from the security services. The authorities do not have the bandwidth to be able to monitor ex-prisoners who are deemed to be at risk of radicalization, or are displaying continued jihadist tendencies, such as Mabsout.

A Tinderbox Ready to Ignite?

Al-Hassan was quick to state that Mabsout acted as a 'lone wolf', and was in an unstable psychological condition (Naharnet, June 4). It is beneficial for the state to characterize this as an isolated incident to soothe public fears and minimize any potential uptick in sectarian tensions. The IS propaganda machine was slow to take credit for the attack, only publishing a declaration of responsibility a month later in its al-Nabaa newsletter; no evidence of collusion with Mabsout was given (The National, July 5). The firearms and explosives utilized by Mabsout indicate some sort of material assistance, but evidence of support from a wider cell has not been uncovered.

Despite the relatively low-impact nature of the incident and a lack of subsequent attacks indicating a developing trend, Mabsout's aggression is representative of an underlying issue. Like Mabsout, there are hundreds of jihadists incarcerated in Roumieh and numerous other detention facilities across Lebanon who will be up for release in the coming months and years. Time in prison could harden their resolve and imbue extremists with the intent to conduct lone-actor attacks targeting state actors (7dnews, June 6).

The structural issues hampering the judicial system are highly unlikely to be solved in the medium term, owing to Lebanon's current financial difficulties and a myriad of other factors. The army and ISF have proved adept at detecting and preventing more high-impact jihadist at-

tacks, but officials are concerned about a revival in lone-actor attacks. Army Commander General Joseph Aoun has voiced concerns about the lone-wolves' ability to operate, as a lack of red flags and operational trip wires make them harder to detect (Asharq al-Aswat, June 5). The release of hardened jihadists, some experienced fighters with time served in Syria, armed with augmented communications networks and renewed anti-state resentment, will prove challenging for the Lebanese security services in the coming months and years.

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Sri Lanka Struggles to Solve the Islamic State-Local Network Puzzle

Animesh Roul

On August 23, the Sri Lankan government ended a four-month-long state of emergency that was declared after multiple suicide bombings inspired by the Islamic State (IS) rocked the South Asian nation (Colombo Page, August 23). Over 250 people died and scores were injured when on April 2,1 Easter Sunday, suicide bombers targeted popular hotels and churches in the capital city of Colombo, Dehiwala, Negombo (on the East Coast), and Batticoloa (on the West Coast). As investigations proceeded, evidence emerged of the involvement of local Islamist groups and individuals inspired and affiliated with IS. The government moved on May 13 to ban three local Salafi-jihadist groups—National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), Jammiyathul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI), and Willayath-As-Seylani (WAS), under the regulations of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). [1] These three organizations have been banned "for the purpose of ensuring the continuance of peace within the country and in the interest of national security, public order, and the rule of law" (Colombo Page, May 14).

The NTJ and JMI had earlier claimed responsibility through IS' Amaq news agency on April 23. The Amaq agency video subsequently released showcased the Easter day bombers and the NTJ's renegade leader Muhammad Zahran Hashim and his associates pledging allegiance to IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The government investigators now believe that before his death, Zahran Hashim and his fellow militants from NTJ and JMI formed the hybrid Willayath-As-Seylani (WAS). WAS is supposedly a new province of IS, with the goal of raising the group's banner in Sri Lanka. However, information about WAS is currently sparse, as the government has been hesitant to confirm any physical manifestation, or even virtual inroads, of IS on Sri Lankan soil.

Persisting Ambiguity

Sri Lanka's President Maithripala Sirisena said in mid-May that "99 percent" of the remaining suspects in the Easter Sunday attacks have been arrested and their explosive materials seized. His reassuring comments were aimed at tourists, urging them to return to the Indian

Ocean island nation. On July 30, Army Commander Lt. Gen. Mahesh Senanayake made a contradictory statement before the Parliamentary Select Committee in charge of the probe of the attacks. He conveyed strongly that Islamist terrorists are still operating at various places in the country and the threats they posed were far from over. Alarmingly, he pointed out that the security agencies are not in a position to say that whether the on-going jihadist problem will be over "within six months or six years'' (DailyMirror.lk, August 1). With the lifting of the state of emergency, the security agencies in charge of investigations insisted that the ban would remain on these three groups and the suspects arrested following the deadly bombings will not be set free (Colombo Gazette, August 24).

Even though these contradicting statements from political and military leaders paint a bleak picture, the security agencies—with the help of foreign intelligence support—have succeeded in partially exposing the covert jihadist networks. The latest estimate suggests that the Sri Lankan police have arrested 293 radicalized individuals in connection with the bombings. The police also stated that over 100 bank accounts belonging to at least 41 of the arrested militants had already been frozen. Sri Lankan police are also working to freeze approximately $33.1 million (or 6 billion Sri Lankan rupees) worth of assets belonging to the militant suspects (Newsfirst Sri Lanka/You Tube, September 5; Colombo Page, September 5).

Understanding the Jihadist Network

Information provided by a senior NTJ operative Mohammad Ahmed Milhan—recently extradited from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia—led Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to unearth a significant arms stockpile in Ollikkulam in Kattankudy on June 27. The stockpile was comprised of detonators, gelignite sticks, liters of liquid gelignite, T-56 ammunition, and several swords (Colombo Page, June 16; Sunday Times, June 27). Milhan was involved in the November 30, 2018 attacks on security forces at Vavnativu, Batticaloa that killed at least two police personnel (The Island, June 14; News First, November 30, 2018). In August, the Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) uncovered another huge cache of arms and explosives from Karandiaya area in Pallai (Jaffna, Western Province). The TID recovered one AK-47 assault rifle, magazines, ammunition, hand grenades, and ten kilograms of plastic explosives from Pallai (Colombo Page, August 26).

Based on interrogation reports, police arrested several pro-Islamic State NTJ and JMI militants in July and August who had pledged to carry out a second wave of attacks following the April bombings. At least 18 of these arrestees have attended NTJ/JMI-run training camps in Hambantota, Nuwara Eliya, and Mullikulam under the leadership of Mohamed Zahran (a.k.a. Abu Ubeida) and his deputy Naufar Maulvi (Ceylon Today, August 28). On August 3, Police arrested JMI's Eastern province military wing leader, Nauzad Umar, and Anuradhapura district leader, Mohammad Ismail Mohammad Salman (Colombo Page, August 4). Between August 5 and 7, at least six members of JMI with strong ties to NTJ were arrested in Ampara. Police identified the individuals as Mohammed Mansur Saifullah (Abu Zahid), Musthak Ali Amher (Abu Hind), Thahir Hidayatullah (Abu Thurab), Mohideen Bawa Ram (Abu Akran), Mohammed Riyal (Abu Salman), and Mohammed Ramsin Rushdi (Abu Alwakar) (Colombo Page, August 5; Colombo Page, August 7). Similarly, on August 16, Mohamed Naufer Abdulla, a NTJ operative, was arrested in Ampara based on information provided by the State Intelligence Unit. Naufer Abdulla is the son of NTJ's second in command, Naufer Moulavi, a close associate of Zahran, who took over leadership of the terror group after the latter's death in the attacks (News First, August 17). Besides Ampara, most of these arrests were made from the Mawanella, Kurunegala, Colombo, and Kalmunai areas of Sri Lanka (News First, August 27).

Although IS claimed responsibility for the Easter Sunday attacks, Sri Lankan authorities have largely blamed local extremist groups led by Zahran Hashim. The government agencies may have possibly overlooked IS' burgeoning covert network inside the country since 2015, virtually linked or inspired by Sharfaz Nilam, who died in Syria (Abu Shurayh al-Silani) and Thauqeer Thajudeen, another Sri Lankan who was fighting alongside IS (Terrorism Monitor, December 2, 2015). Both are pioneer Sri Lankan operatives for IS and likely inspired hundreds of individuals toward IS ideals.

Sri Lankan agencies may have discovered another clue relating to Abdul Lathief Jameel Mohamed, one of the suicide bombers responsible for the Easter Sunday attack in Dehiwala, and his ties with IS operative Abu Khaled al-Cambodi (Neil Prakash) (Colombo Page, April 26). Also, the local connections of the about 50 Sri Lankan citizens who traveled to Syria to join the jihadist group remains unsolved, and the government remains tight-lipped about sympathizers and several IS re-

turnees. There is no publicly available information about the fate of several doctors and health care providers who were working with IS in Syria and Iraq.

Expectedly, Sri Lankan authorities have yet to establish any direct links between the local jihadists groups and IS, or any other transnational jihadist organizations. They do not know if Zahran or somebody who is still active is the missing link connecting IS to NTJ and other local affiliates. The question remains how IS' Amaq news agency released the audio-visuals sent from Katankudy or Colombo claiming responsibility for the mayhem. Aside from the post-bombing releases from Amaq, IS' news outlet released an infographic on July 24 claiming to have carried out over 1,800 attacks in the first six months of 2019, and Sri Lanka was under IS' "major events" category. The investigations and interrogations clearly lead to the conclusion that the banned groups and the members responsible for the suicide bombings were inspired by IS ideology, despite official statements from some Sri Lankan leaders.

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Notes

[1] "The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

Government Notifications: The Public Security Ordinance, May 13, 2019, http://fiusrilanka.gov.lk/docs/Regulations/2123-02/2123-02_E.pdf

Some Old, Some New: Grievances, Players, and Backers in the Conflict in Southern Yemen

Brian M. Perkins

The war in Yemen has grown increasingly intractable over the past several months as the long-simmering rift within the anti-Houthi coalition has widened, with violence between the pro-secession Southern Transitional Council (STC) and Hadi and Islah-aligned forces erupting in Aden, Shabwa, and Abyan.

The conflict between these parties is not new and centers around historical regional grievances and fractious politics, even within each side of the dispute. Although the underlying grievances fueling the conflict are old, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's involvement in the war and support for divergent groups and political outcomes has created new dimensions and stoked animosity between the warring parties. As the situation escalates, the prospect of restoring Hadi to power and maintaining a united Yemen will only become more untenable. While the outcome cannot be predicted with any certainty, a look at the key players and underlying grievances does shed light on key turning points and likely future developments and stumbling blocks.

An Untenable Alliance

From the start, the anti-Houthi coalition was an amalgamation of Hadi-aligned military units, tribal militias, Islah-aligned groups, and various Southern secessionist groups that would have never allied themselves under normal circumstances. The strength and prominence of some of these groups, as well as the turmoil amongst them, has been deeply affected by Saudi and Emirati backing and political maneuvering.

The so-called "Southern question" regarding how the region should be governed has been lingering for decades, with intermittent surges in calls for secession tamped down, often violently, by the government. Many of the key players involved on both sides over the decades are still at the center of the simmering conflict in Southern Yemen, but others have gained prominence as a result of the current war and support from either

Saudi Arabia or the UAE. In fact, the political and military moves Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have made since the war started have compounded longstanding grievances and undermined their own stated goal of restoring Hadi's government and a united Yemen.

As the Houthis pushed south, already established and ad-hoc militias—including Aidroos al-Zubaidi's Southern Resistance—became the first line of defense. Zubaidi's group in al-Dhale was among the first to regain territory largely unsupported by external patrons, earning him new notoriety among secessionist circles. There was still an obvious need for the Saudi coalition to build local capacities as the Houthis seized increasingly more territory in Southern Yemen. Southern secessionist militias at the time were not well-organized or cohesive across the south, tribal militias were ill-equipped, and the Army was divided across countless lines, with loyalty being split between the late former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Islah-affiliated General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, or President Hadi.

The UAE supported Zubaidi and other secessionist-leaning militias across the Southern governorates, ultimately equipping and training (some were trained outside Yemen) thousands of Southerners who now comprise the Southern Transitional Council and the closely linked military and police forces, including the Security Belt and Elite Forces, which span Aden, Lahj, al-Dhale, Abyan, Shabwa, and Hadramawt ([Terrorism Monitor](), June 14, 2018).

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia continued to support Hadi, anti-Houthi tribes, and the Yemeni military units still loyal to Hadi. However, Hadi and Riyadh quickly realized that they were ill-equipped to take on the Houthis without further military, political, and tribal support, which is where the mercurial general, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, enters the fray. Ali Mohsen was the former commander of the northwestern military district and 1st Armored Division, having helped crush southern forces during the North-South civil war and led the Saada wars against the Houthis. Ali Mohsen is from Saleh's Sanhan clan and is closely aligned with Islah. Mohsen also has a storied history of helping spread Salafist/Wahabi teachings and recruiting mujahideen to fight in Afghanistan, including Tariq al-Fadhli (Ali Mohsen's brother-in-law), who helped found the Islamic Jihad Movement and allegedly helped assassinate southern leaders ([Aljazeera](), May 5, 2013; [Terrorism Monitor](), November 20, 2009; [Terrorism Monitor](), October 14, 2016). Ali Mohsen's partnership with

Hadi came with a price—the position of deputy supreme commander of the military and then vice president—but he delivered highly essential military units and brought with him a host of Islah-aligned militias and supporters ([alaraby](), February 23, 2016).

The problem with Ali Mohsen once again being in a position of power is multifaceted. The memory of the civil war is a significant motivation for secessionist sentiment and Ali Mohsen is viewed as the face of the North's destruction of the South during the civil war. Mohsen has long been accused of ties to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and was previously accused of facilitating the assassination of secessionist leaders. Ali Mohsen is also a prominent Islah-affiliated figure, which has long been at odds with Southern secessionist groups as well as the Emiratis. In fact, Emirati support for Southern forces and condemnation of other regional Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups, including actions against Qatar, served to inflame already existing animosity between the STC and Islah. UAE's staunch opposition to Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups meant Islah was excluded from Emirati patronage and access to the training, equipment, and financing received by other southern groups, with Islah militias ultimately taking a backseat to the prominent security roles played by the Security Belt and Elite Forces. This only furthered disdain toward the STC.

Many Southern Yemenis—regardless of their affinity for the Southern Transitional Council—are quick to point out the economic and political marginalization their communities experienced as a result of what is often called the "failed unity" between the former Yemen Arab Republic in the North and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the South. Memories of pre and post-civil war Southern Yemen and the plundering of government institutions and southern resources loom large for those who witnessed it firsthand, including those who established Hirak, a peaceful southern protest movement that, in many ways, is a precursor to the Southern Transitional Council. Similarly, animosity against the parties involved, including President Hadi (a native southerner who acted as Saleh's Defense Minister during the North-South Civil War), Ali Mohsen, and the Islah party continues. [1] With Hadi in exile and his government appointees running southern governmental bodies, it was only a matter of time before the parallels between post-unification Yemen and the current political balance erupted into open violence with the STC seeking to replace Hadi's government.

The Southern Transitional Council, despite describing itself as the preeminent political body supported by all Southerners, has still faced significant challenges in garnering the support needed to completely govern and control areas outside its bastion of Aden. Many of these challenges stem from ideological, generational and regional differences, down to the tribal level and linked closely with previous divisions dating back to PDRY infighting but intensified by divergent Saudi and Emirati strategies.

The aging and largely exiled generation of prominent Southern figures that ran the former PDRY, founded Hirak, and witnessed unification and civil war has a significantly different outlook and approach in comparison to the younger and more militant generation of leaders and activists that led the charge during the Yemeni uprising and only gained prominence after the onset of the current war. Similarly, there are noticeable regional differences and divisions among southern governorates, particularly regarding the desire for outright secession. Also, Southern tribes and figures who had the virtue of enjoying northern patronage, much in the way that Hadi did, do not want to see those ties severed by secession.

The Southern Transitional Council, led by Aidaroos al-Zubaidi and Hani bin Brik, and its associated Security Belt forces have maintained de facto control over Aden and strong but not unchallenged support in its power axis of al-Dhale and Lajh, from which many prominent STC figures hail, including Zubaidi. Outside of these governorates, the STC also maintains significant support, with local councils and its Elite Forces sharing security duties with various pro-Hadi forces in Shabwa, Abyan, and Hadramawt. Despite notable support in these areas, the STC still faces major pockets of opposition—particularly in Shabwa—from a range of actors, including Hadi and Islah loyalists, as well as former PDRY and Hirak figures that are pro-Hadi and against the STC, divided along similar regional lines of the 1986 civil war between warring sides of the PDRY and those who joined Northern forces after unification.

Despite the turmoil, the STC and Hadi-aligned forces had managed to pull back and maintain a semblance of stability even after numerous armed clashes in Aden over the past several years. However, what has remained clear is that Hadi and his government have steadily lost legitimacy and the UAE's moves to distance itself from the war in Yemen likely sped up the STC's timeline for attempting to take control.

A Dangerous New Front

The STC and southern forces, likely embolden by the UAE distancing itself from the war, seized control of Aden in mid-August. The move came just days after a Houthi attack in Aden killed Munir al-Yafei (a.k.a. Abu al-Yamama), a prominent PDRY military leader who was also active during the Arab Spring (Aden al-Ghad, August 2). The combination of the UAE's withdrawal and his death served as a catalyst for the current clashes, as STC members accused Ali Mohsen and Islah of infiltrating the government and working with the Houthis to target their forces.

After seizing control of Aden's military bases and government facilities, on August 20, STC-aligned forces moved to take control of key strategic locations in other governorates. STC forces pushed into Abyan, Hadi's home governorate, besieging Zinjibar and Lawdar before moving on to Ataq, the capital of Shabwa governorate (Aljazeera, August 20; Asharq al-Awsat, August 24). Pro-Hadi forces managed to regain some territory, primarily in Shabwa, and pursued STC forces near Balhaf, the site of key coastal oil infrastructure, pushing them back toward Aden.

While both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have publicly called for an end to the fighting, each side provided material support to their proxies, with Saudi Arabia conducting an airstrike on STC forces in Aden and the Emiratis striking Hadi's forces near Zinjibar (alaraby, August 29; Middle East Eye, August 11). The Hadi government has lambasted the STC for conducting a coup and the UAE for its aggression and attempts to divide the country. Meanwhile, STC officials and activists have been quick to point out that the Hadi government has redeployed forces in order to prevent the STC from "controlling its rightful territory" instead of using the forces to fight the Houthis. [2] Similarly, as the coalition has called for an end to the fighting, Ali Mohsen's forces have still been seen moving military personnel and equipment in preparation to retake STC-controlled areas (Twitter.com/yaseralyafai).

The UAE and Saudi Arabia, despite public statements to the contrary, are very much at odds with one another and now Riyadh finds itself in a considerably weakened position. The new front between the STC and Hadi-aligned forces will likely be a boon for both the Houthis and AQAP as resources and attention are focused on preventing major, prolonged fighting from breaking out in the South. Meanwhile, the turmoil could see new al-

liances of convenience that strengthen the Houthis position in a manner akin to the unusual alliance that had existed between the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh, only this time the Houthis could potentially find willing partners in Ali Mohsen and Islah, or the STC.

Hadi's Loss of Legitimacy and Potential Future Developments

The coming months are likely to see significant political and military maneuvering as the STC and various groups from the pro-Hadi camp attempt to strengthen their position. Both the STC and Islah have allegedly opened up lines of communication with the Houthis and could seek to strike an alliance if an acceptable ceasefire is not made. If either side does align with the Houthis, Saudi Arabia, and Hadi will find themselves in a decidedly unwinnable situation.

Regardless, Hadi's government no longer holds any legitimacy, particularly in the eyes of much of Southern Yemen and certainly not with the Houthis. In previous conflicts, outside powers have looked to the second in command as a potential successor or compromise for warring parties, but Ali Mohsen is among the most polarizing political/military figures in the country and his control of the government is entirely untenable if the country ever hopes to achieve peace. Mohsen's connection to Islah will also preclude him from being considered as viable by the UAE. Similarly, there are no figures that currently hold political appointments with enough clout, and that have remained relatively neutral or untainted by the unsavory alliances the war has brought about.

As the UAE and Saudi Arabia seek to broker peace between the STC and Hadi, they will need to delicately balance their short-term gestures of goodwill toward each side of the conflict as a perceived imbalance will undoubtedly see resumed fighting. Similarly, they need to balance their divergent strategic interests. The coalition must also be considering longer-term plans as to how to answer the Southern question and find a more palatable leader to potentially succeed Hadi. There are few politicians who have made it out of the conflict relatively untainted. One figure does, however, stand out and that is Khaled Bahah, who served as Hadi's Vice President between 2015 and 2016 before being sacked and replaced by Ali Mohsen. Bahah is known to be tolerated by the Houthis and the STC and is among the few former highly-ranking political figures to have returned to Aden, and it would not be surprising to hear

his name surface more frequently in the coming months (Aljazeera, October 19, 2014).

Yemen is unlikely to ever be put back together again and the question for the future is whether the country will be split along previous North-South lines or carved into a federal system. Secession is unlikely to garner the international support it would need, particularly as it could leave the Houthis with power along Saudi Arabia's border and the Kingdom has repeatedly expressed their opposition to such an outcome. A federal system is more likely but comes with the issue of who would subsidize less affluent governorates and would still require identifying a consensus political figure, among other serious challenges.

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Notes

[1] Based on author's interviews with dozens of Southerners in Aden, Abyan, Hadramawt, and Shabwa between 2016-2019

[2] Authors interview with Aden based activist on August 30, 2019.