

What Options Remain for the Separatists After the Disolution of the Southern Transitional Council?

A Situation Assessment
Political Analysis Unit
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Executive Summary

Since its establishment in May 2017, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) has functioned as far more than a conventional political actor. It developed into an integrated system of political, financial, and military power oriented toward secession. Backed by armed formations deployed across multiple governorates and sustained by extensive Emirati support, the STC rapidly emerged as a parallel authority to State institutions and security agencies. Over time, it engaged in repeated military confrontations with the internationally recognized government, ultimately consolidating exclusive control over Aden and several other governorates.

The decision to dissolve the STC raises critical questions regarding the future trajectory of separatists. This shift implies a transition from a hybrid political-military entity toward a phase of reconfiguring power relations within the state framework. Such a moment represents a pivotal juncture that necessitates an analytical framework linking the dismantling of armed movements on the one hand with the reconstruction of local authority and state institutions on the other. It must also be acknowledged that entities of this nature are not defined solely by their formal structures, but by the depth and resilience of the networks sustaining their influence.

This assessment focuses on the future of Yemen's eastern and southern governorates following the decision to dissolve the STC and the escape of its chairman from the political scene. It examines the options available to emerging leadership, mechanisms for managing local authorities and state institutions amid rapid developments and persistent challenges. Finally, the study outlines the most plausible scenarios based on current indicators and on-the-ground realities.

Introduction

Developments have accelerated significantly in recent days, particularly after the internationally recognized government—supported by the Saudi-led Arab Coalition—regained control over Hadramout, Al-Mahra, and Shabwa earlier this month. Attention subsequently shifted toward Aden, Abyan, and Lahj, where the STC found itself facing a narrowing set of increasingly constrained options. This outcome followed its significant defeat in Hadramout and Al-Mahra, its exposure in Shabwa and Abyan, and its failure to achieve its secessionist objectives.

On January 6, a Yemenia Airways flight departed Aden International Airport for Riyadh, scheduled to carry STC chairman Aidrus al-Zoubaidi and several senior leaders to participate in a Saudi-sponsored dialogue. It soon became clear, however, that al-Zoubaidi had not arrived in Riyadh. Subsequent reports confirmed that he disappeared upon reaching the airport, switched off his phone, and fled by sea to Somalia. This was later corroborated by statements from the Arab Coalition and the Somali government, while the Abu Dhabi government denied the reports.

Further disclosures indicated that prior to his escape, al-Zoubaidi ordered his forces to traffick weapons from military camps in Aden to facilities under his control in Al-Dhalea. He also reportedly distributed weapons to STC supporters in Aden, apparently seeking to foment instability following his escape.

In response, the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) revoked al-Zoubaidi's membership and issued a formal decree accusing him of high treason. Days later, several STC leaders convened and announced the dissolution of the council, along with the termination of all its formations, structures, and branches. Nevertheless, some STC officials rejected the dissolution, launched rhetorical attacks against Saudi Arabia, attempted to mobilize public sentiment, and organized protest activities on January 10 and 16, while continuing to threaten further escalation.

The Broader Context and the Crisis of Transition

Following its establishment in May 2017, the STC evolved into what effectively amounted to a “state within a state.” Through its armed formations deployed across several southern areas and sustained by extensive Emirati backing, it constructed a parallel authority to official state institutions and security agencies. This support emboldened the council to rebel against the state and confront it militarily on multiple occasions, culminating in its unilateral control over Aden and several governorates as part of its secessionist project.

However, the STC’s dissolution decision on January 9, 2026, has created a vacuum that requires a reordering of influence within the state. This critical juncture requires an analytical approach that simultaneously addresses the dismantling of armed separatist structures and the reconstruction of local governance and state institutions. Importantly, such entities cannot be assessed merely by the existence or absence of formal organizations, but by the depth and durability of the networks sustaining their power.¹

In contemporary conflict settings, the absence of centralized leadership often leads to what can be described as “structural fragmentation,” whereby hierarchical organizations devolve into networks of localized interest-based centers². In the case of the STC, al-Zubaidi functioned as its central pillar. His abrupt escape and disappearance from the political arena stripped the council of several key strengths, most notably:

- Unified political decision-making.
- The ability to organize and command affiliated structures, including armed formations.
- Centralized channels of internal and external communication.

Under these conditions, the collapse of central leadership is likely to produce fragmented sub-factional networks. While less cohesive and more difficult to control, such networks often prove more adaptable and capable of reconstituting themselves within non-state political and administrative frameworks.³

Leaders who publicly rejected the dissolution of the STC—some of whom currently reside in the United Arab Emirates—now face a fundamentally altered political landscape. Their options appear largely confined to the following pathways:

- **Open confrontation:** This option remains a low-probability scenario, given the absence of any declared external sponsor capable of providing political cover and material support. Moreover, the erosion of cohesive military capabilities⁴—particularly following the severe setbacks suffered by STC-affiliated forces in Hadramout and Al-Mahra—further diminishes the feasibility of this option.
- **Covert defiance:** This approach may allow for the reconstitution of non-state influence networks; however, its outcomes remain highly uncertain in an environment characterized by intense monitoring from allies, rivals, and competing stakeholders alike.
- **Repositioning within State institutions:** This strategy involves reintegration into formal structures while awaiting an opportunity to regain influence under more favorable conditions.⁵

Historical patterns suggest that such behavior reflects a survival-oriented logic rather than a coherent or sustainable political strategy.

Dismantling Armed Formations

Prior to its dissolution, the STC controlled multiple military and security formations, including the Support and Reinforcement Forces, the Security Belt Forces, and the Thunderbolt and Storm units. In addition, commanders of several units formally affiliated with the Ministry of Defense had declared allegiance to the STC.

The government response, coordinated with the Arab Coalition, has focused on integrating all military and security units under the authority of the Ministry of Defense. In this context, presidential directives have explicitly emphasized that no armed forces will be permitted to operate outside government control, as exercised through the Ministries of Defense and Interior.

This once again raises a central question: what is the fate of the STC-affiliated armed formations following the council's dissolution and the escaping of its Chairman, who had been portrayed as the supreme commander of these forces?

Current assessments and available indicators suggest that these formations are likely to be incorporated into the Giants Brigades, commanded by Presidential Leadership Council member Major General Abdulrahman al-Muharrami. During al-Zubaidi's escape, al-Muharrami publicly reaffirmed his commitment to operating within the framework of the government and the presidency under the leadership of the Arab Coalition. This stance was notable given his previous role as al-Zubaidi's deputy within the STC and his earlier endorsement of a statement opposing presidential decisions issued late last month, including the expulsion of Emirati forces from Yemen and the annulment of the joint defense agreement with Abu Dhabi.

According to presidential directives and political understandings, the Nation's Shield Forces, which operate under the authority of Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Dr. Rashad al-Alimi, will assume responsibility for securing Aden and neighboring governorates—mirroring their role in the eastern governorates. The Giants Brigades will also be deployed to secure selected areas. Some STC-affiliated units are expected to be integrated into the Giants Brigades, while others will be redeployed away from urban centers.

According to statements by military leaders aligned with the internationally recognized government and the Arab Coalition, certain formations—such as the Security Belt Forces—will be reassigned to frontlines against the Houthi movement after undergoing restructuring to align with new operational requirements. This approach aims to prevent further fragmentation or internal conflict within the pro-government camp. The unification of political and military decision-making has thus become a top priority for the presidency, the government, and the Arab Coalition, particularly following the withdrawal of the United Arab Emirates from Yemen and the coalition, and the dissolution of the STC, which had functioned as a parallel authority to the legitimate government in liberated governorates.

Many aspects of the future status of these forces are expected to become clearer in the coming period as the situation moves toward relative stability. There are assurances that personnel affiliated with these formations will not be dismissed, as the primary objective is to end the condition of institutional and security duality that has characterized the landscape in recent years, rather than to demobilize tens of thousands of soldiers.

Options and Challenges for the New Leadership

Following the self-dissolution of the Southern Transitional Council, the Yemeni government adopted a strategy of “soft dismantling” in appointing new leadership for the southern and eastern governorates. This approach relied on figures either close to the STC or previously associated with it. Notable examples include Abdulrahman al-Muharrami, commander of the Giants Brigades and a member of the Presidential Leadership Council; Abdulrahman al-Sheikh, Governor of Aden and a former STC figure; the appointment of Mahmoud al-Subaihi to the Presidential Leadership Council as a replacement for Aidarus al-Zubaidi; and the designation of Salem al-Khambashi as Governor of Hadramout in place of Faraj al-Bahsani, who had adopted positions supportive of al-Zubaidi and has been based in Abu Dhabi since the outbreak of clashes in Hadramout.

The most consequential appointment was in Al-Dhalea, where Shaye' al-Zandani, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, was named Prime Minister. This move reflects an attempt to recalibrate regional balance within southern Yemen's power and influence map, structured around three principal blocs:

- **Yafa'a**, represented by PLC member al-Muharrami and Aden Governor al-Sheikh.
- **Al-Subaiha**, represented by PLC member Mahmoud al-Subaihi and several senior commanders of the Giants Brigades responsible for securing Aden and Lahj.
- **Al-Dhalea**, currently represented by Prime Minister al-Zandani, with expectations that its share in future appointments will increase, particularly among figures who played a role in dismantling the STC and issuing the decision to dissolve it.

The emergence of new leaders in local authorities represents an effort to reconstruct the architecture of internationally recognized state power. Experience suggests that integrating individuals previously affiliated with armed entities into State institutions is a complex process, requiring a decisive break from the regionalized and militarized mobilization that prevailed during the STC era. It also necessitates the construction of new institutional linkages capable of addressing current challenges across Yemen as a whole.

While the decision to dissolve the STC has provided the new leadership with stronger political cover, broader legitimacy, and a rare opportunity to rebuild local authorities without a rival actor capable of obstruction, it simultaneously places a heavy burden of responsibility on these leaders. Chief among these responsibilities is preventing the re-emergence of the STC under new names or alternative frameworks. This will constitute a demanding test, one that cannot be met without dismantling the entrenched networks of influence that will actively seek to reassert control, even through sabotage and the deliberate destabilization of the broader political environment.

Conflict experience indicates that leaders who “transition” from a dissolved entity are often more vulnerable to pressure and blackmail.⁶

It is important to note the clear distinctions between the eastern and southern blocs. The eastern regions comprise Hadramout, Al-Mahra, Shabwa, and Socotra, while the southern bloc includes Aden, Abyan, Lahj, and Al-Dhalea. The eastern governorates are characterized by a relatively higher degree of social stability, less polarized loyalties, and stronger forms of local legitimacy more closely aligned with state institutions. These conditions make transition and stabilization processes more feasible and less costly.

By contrast, the southern governorates exhibit a deeper and more entrenched conflict dynamic, which explains the broader footprint of the STC in these areas. As a result, the transition process in the south is considerably more complex. In this context, the eastern regions may serve during the forthcoming transition phase as a model of relative success—demonstrating the potential for effective transformation, recovery, and a shift toward reconstruction, development, and stability based on inclusive participation, strengthened justice and equality, and the preservation of social cohesion.

Expected Scenarios

Based on the preceding analysis and a review of both the temporal and contextual developments, several post-STC scenarios can be identified:

□ Scenario One: Structured Dismantlement

This scenario entails the genuine implementation of the dissolution decision, followed by integration into state institutions based on capacity, competence, and functional needs. While this represents the most desirable outcome, it appears less likely than the following scenario.

□ Scenario Two: Informal Continuity

This scenario involves a largely symbolic dissolution, with former influence preserved through undeclared networks. Such an outcome would significantly increase the challenges facing the new leadership, exacerbate existing problems, and obstruct reform efforts aimed at addressing the dysfunctions inherited from the STC's previous governance. STC figures—particularly those implicated in perilous violations, including killings, targeted assassinations, abductions, coercive disappearances, or large-scale public fund misappropriation—would have strong incentives to obstruct reform in order to prevent exposure of their records to domestic and international scrutiny. This scenario currently appears the most probable outcome.

□ Scenario Three: Escalation and Destabilization

This scenario envisions a turn toward escalation and widespread disorder, driven by military and security leaders who reject the STC dissolution decision and seek to exploit remaining weapons and loyal supporters to disrupt the broader political environment. Indicators of this scenario are already observable in the escalating rhetoric of certain leaders operating outside Aden, their repeated calls for protests, and their efforts to provoke local authorities and the security forces tasked with protecting governorates and state institutions. By invoking the banner of the “southern cause,” these actors may attempt to capitalize on rising tensions; in the event of clashes between state authorities and protesters, they are likely to exploit public grievances to fuel conflict, obstruct recovery, and prevent the attainment of much-needed stabilization.

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