



Houthi Manipulation of the Secessionist Agenda

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Situation Assessment

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Overview

In May, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) organized what it called a Consultative Meeting in Aden. Factions of the southern movement, civil society organizations, and military and tribal leaders participated in the meeting, which was not merely an ordinary political event. In fact, the timing, the resulting documents and the subsequent declarations and appointments made it a remarkable event that sparked much controversy and concerns among Yemenis in general and Yemeni political forces in particular. It was generally seen as a momentous event and a move towards empowering the STC, geared to set the scene for the secession of the south.

This analysis tries to account for these moves and what they mean to the Houthi group, which controls most of the densely-populated northern governorates. It traces the Houthi reactions towards these developments, examining their meaning and consequences. It also explores horizons of the Houthi position and the anticipates Houthi policies.

Secessionist Shifts at a Critical Stage

Under the slogan "Towards a new south that embodies the southern people's aspirations to independence and the restoration of the independent federal state of the south," The STC held the consultative meeting on May 04-08, 2023. Southern Movement factions, civil society organizations, and military and tribal leaders participated in the event. The STC did not mince words concerning the goals of the meeting. The proceedings, statements and releases of the meeting are theoretical and practical preparations for secession. The STC [pointed out](#) that the goal of the meeting was to [contain](#) as many southern forces as possible in order to reach a political consensus and a unified vision that support a return to the pre-1990 state of affairs—prior to the merger of the southern and northern Yemen states in the momentous Yemeni reunification, and to engage the various factions in drawing the contours of the southern state, and management of the next phase. The meeting [resulted](#) in a number of documents stressing the demands for secession, the most important of which was the "Southern National Charter," a document that defines the southern issue as "the current cause of the people of the south vis-à-vis the occupying forces of the Yemen Arab Republic," and pushes towards secession as the only solution of this issue. This document refers to the form of the would-be "southern state" as a civil, democratic federal state to be established on the same territory of the former Democratic Republic of Yemen (1967-1990).

At the end of this event, the STC announced restructuring its top leadership body and the appointment of two southern members of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC)—Commander of the Giants Brigades, Abu Zara'h Al-Mahrami, and former Governor of Hadramout, Faraj Salmin Al-Bahsni— as deputy chairmen of the STC.

Houthi Gains from STC Moves

The STC moves are generally beneficial to the Houthis in many ways. These acts are identical with the group's needs and provide it with an opportunity of manipulation. Houthi gains and opportunities arise mainly from the timing of these moves which came at a sensitive stage of peace negotiations that offer promising opportunities of achieving progress in the path of ending the conflict and bringing peace, thanks to the promising breakthrough in the relations of the two regional powers implicated in the Yemeni conflict; i.e., Saudi Arabia and Iran. The two countries have reached an agreement brokered by China to normalize bilateral relations and enhance cooperation.

1. Weakening the government and its allies

The STC acts weaken the position of the legitimate government and the Yemeni forces allied with it, laying bare their weakness and inability to influence events. They also weaken their confidence and reliability, especially in light of the silence of the PLC and the government towards these developments. For example, the fact that two members of the PLC joined the STC indicates that the PLC is going through a phase of inefficacy and chaos. Such a Houthi gain is also reinforced by the silence of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which failed to comment on the situation. The negative attitude of these two major regional actors casts doubt on their intentions towards Yemen, as much as on their support for the PLC and the government. In this context, former Yemeni ambassador to Jordan, Ali [Al-Amrani](#), comments: "The two PLC members joining the separatist STC leadership suggests ... that the PLC was merely created to forward the secessionist agenda. Was that a planned goal pursued from the outset of launching this council, especially if we take into account halting the liberation operations on pre-unity partition borders?" In fact, Houthi and STC interests intersect at this junction, since weakening the Yemeni government and the forces allied it is a joint gain for both of them.

2. Reinforcing Houthi Legitimacy

Given the concerns they give rise to and the threats they pose to unity, in addition to weakening the position of the legitimate government, these STC moves provide the Houthi group with a cause to champion and an opportunity to reinforce its legitimacy.

So far, those acts have helped it appear as the only political force keen on preserving the country's unity, especially in light of the dumb reaction of the [PLC](#), the government and other Yemeni actors towards these moves and towards the two PLC members' joining the STC and their being appointed to its top leadership body.

Given the awkward and vulnerable positions of the other Yemeni forces due to the restrictions imposed by their place and alliance connections that curb their ability to express strong positions towards STC moves—let alone stand against any threats to the unity of the country, the status quo helps promote the Houthi movement as the only reliable force capable of preventing partition of the country, and thus emerges as "[the savior and protector](#)," in the words of one of the group's leaders.

3. Disrupting the Political Track

The STC moves came at a time when it seemed that peace efforts began to bear fruit with the visit of the first Saudi delegation to Sana'a. They also coincided with an important regional development; namely, the Saudi-Iranian agreement to normalize relations, a development that boosted optimism and assumptions that the conflict is ripe for peace more than ever before. As for the Houthi group, these developments constitute a source of pressure on the group as they may facilitate reaching a peaceful settlement. At the same time, they involve great risks that such an agreement is at odds with the terms of the peace it seeks to obtain. Quite logically, any peaceful settlement concluded at present may not guarantee Houthi domination of Yemeni politics nor will it allow the group to keep its weapons, especially if such a settlement is framed in the three well-known peace references: the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference, the Gulf Initiative and Implementation Mechanism, and the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions. Therefore, it is in the interest of the group to disrupt the political track. This may be the desire of its ally, Iran, if this latter wants to evade the commitments imposed by its agreement with Saudi Arabia. Paradoxically, Houthi interests intersect again with the STC, as the latter is also prone to disrupt the political process, since it is cognizant of the opposition of the international community to secession and realizes that achieving its secessionist agenda will be more difficult if a political settlement is reached. Like the Houthi group, it does not favor a settlement that insists on disarming it as that would entail failure to restore the southern state. Both parties are only [willing](#) to sign a fragile peace agreement that would guarantee their retention of weapons. Both have previously refused to implement the military and security articles of previous agreements, such as the Riyadh Agreement in the case of the STC and the Peace and Partnership Agreement in the case of the Houthis.

For the Houthi group, disrupting the political track is not a hardline policy. Rather, it has only been possible thanks to these moves and through the justification it gives to political escalation and suspending or refraining from negotiations on the pretext that the STC and the coalition countries must state their position towards these developments and towards the unity of Yemen. Member of the Houthi negotiating delegation, Abdulmalik Al-Ajri, has previously [stated](#) that such moves did not reflect goodwill towards existing understandings or towards Yemen and Yemen's unity unless the countries concerned declared a clear position on those escalatory measures. Playing havoc with the political process can also be justified by the assumption that those acts call for military escalation on the pretext of preserving the unity of the country whenever required and when circumstances are favorable.

The Houthi View of Dealing with the STC Escalatory Measures

The Houthi authorities stated that they viewed the STC measures as a [full-fledged coup](#) against the Republic of Yemen and an escalation that could not have happened without a green light from the coalition countries. They further said that those moves are part of a major conspiracy to divide Yemen, which does not stop at partitioning the country along former northern and southern lines. Rather, it aims to divide the country into small controllable states that would be entangled in endless fighting. According to the Houthis, all that the STC would be able to accomplish is at best establishing a functional state in the service of the coalition countries.

The group accuses both Saudi Arabia and the UAE of supporting STC escalatory measures, and links the events to what it views as "a Saudi-Emirati struggle for influence in Yemen, which is being contained by the sponsors of both countries and of the international conspiracy; i.e., the United States and Britain. The sponsors' attempt to contain the competition through consensus on the partition of Yemen."

In a speech on May 23, on the occasion of the group's so-called scream (slogan), the [Houthi group leader](#), said that the situation in the provinces controlled by the legitimate government amounted to an occupation, and that voices that rise there do so only at the instigation of the 'aggressors', are insignificant and do not serve the southern cause, nor any other cause. He added that such voices came "in the context of the conspiracies of the aggressors, the foreign occupation," and that the group deals with developments on this basis. The group's view is that "the coalition countries view partitioning Yemen as a means of securing their interests, ensuring security and minimizing Yemen's role and the threats that it may pose." This led the group leader to state that "Saudi Arabia cannot have peace at home, nor can it achieve its economic ambitions except through peace with Yemen and lifting the siege imposed on the country."

In the monitored reactions, the group threatened to escalate and move to confront recent developments. This threat was expressed in explicit terms by the group's [Prime Minister](#), Abdulaziz bin Habtoor, who addressed the coalition countries, "You have an opportunity for peace between equals; yet we are ready to go back to square one of confrontation." Houthi Deputy Foreign Minister, [Hussein Al-Ezzi](#), warned: "The aggression countries must stop their systematic tampering with the unity of Yemen... transgressing the red lines and playing with issues of the magnitude of the unity of Yemen." The threat was also expressed by member of the Houthi negotiating delegation, Abdulmalik [Al-Ajri](#), "You are free to antagonize Ansar Allah and the National Authority in Sana'a as much as you can, but the Republic and unity, the most important national gains in modern Yemen, are red lines, so much so that picking thorns with bare hands is much easier."

The Scenario of Escalation and Return to War

Now, to what extent can the Houthi group proceed with its reactions to and threats against the STC agenda of restoring the southern state? How may the group manipulate events or behave both diplomatically and through action on the ground?

In fact, what matters to the Houthis at the present stage is using these developments as propagandistic capital and manipulating them as an instrument of pressure in current and future negotiations. They also manipulate these escalatory measures to discredit their opponents, fuel the situation and encourage dissent against the STC and the government. There are indicators that they will contact and/or increase contacts with the parties that are actively engaged in confronting the STC and coalition countries and with the parties and individuals infuriated by STC escalations and might end up fighting it or its secessionist agenda. Apparently, the Houthis count on, and build relations with, tribal groups or entities in particular. So much is revealed, for example, in a statement by member of the group's Politburo, [Muhammad Al-Bukhaiti](#), "The tribe of Madhaj from Dhamar and Marib in the north to the coasts of Abyan, Shabwa and Lahj in the south will only be a spearhead in the face of the aggression countries and in the liberation of Yemen and the restoration of the country's geographical and demographic depth in the Arabian Peninsula."

Although these moves constitute a ground for military escalation—the group began to hint [at such an escalation](#) in its media and through group leaders, it is unlikely that it will engage in a significant military escalation at least in the foreseeable term. The Houthis will avoid such an option as much as they can, since escalation involves political losses and military and security risks. For example, it might result in losing the international anti-war stance and may push the international community to reconsider its position and allow a counter-offensive.

On the other hand, the Iranian position is a crucial factor that curbs any Houthi military propensities or impulses that could run afoul of the Iran's policy of reconciliation with, and openness towards, Saudi Arabia and the countries of the region, as well as the Omani-brokered negotiations that Tehran is mediating with the United States on the renewal of the nuclear agreement. In general, the Houthis will not go beyond the limits of voicing threats of launching a military offensive, confronting the STC, and marching on its strongholds.

That military escalation is excluded is confirmed by experiences during the past period. Threats of reescalation and targeting the coalition countries if no breakthroughs in negotiations are made, or more precisely, if the group's preconditions are not met, have become common currency over the past year. Yet, the group did not carry out any of those threats, in spite of the fact that none of its preconditions and demands were approved.

However, chances of escalation will rise when the risks of escalation are either equal to or more benign than the risks of inaction. This can happen in certain circumstances such as the separatists' initiation of new measures and activities that boost their recent moves with the aim of creating a new reality on the ground and to consolidate a separatist reality. Another factor that might push towards escalation is the identical bent towards and need for escalation by both the Houthi group and Tehran. Finally, there is the attempt by the international and regional community to impose a peace agreement against the group's interests, which, from the vantage point of the Houthis involves greater threats and risks than those involved in escalation. In this case, the Houthi bluster of protecting the unity of the country seems to offer a good justification for escalation.

If escalation is the final viable option, it will be well-considered and limited in scope, means and targets. Besides walking the tightrope of avoiding large-scale land operations, the group will prefer using low-cost and effective weapons; i.e., drones and missiles which have effectively forced the government to stop oil exports during the past months and had earlier forced the Arab-coalition countries to reconsider their position on the conflict and to opt for peace. Although some Houthi leaders affirm that [revenge](#) and settling accounts associated with any secessionist moves will be with the coalition countries, weighing gains and risks tends to suggest that any Houthi escalation will be restricted to Yemeni territory.



مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث

Abaad Studies & Research Center

-  00967 737 887 778
-  00967 737 887 778
-  @abaadstudies
-  @abaadstudies
-  Abaad Studies & Research Center
-  مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث
-  abaadstudies@gmail.com
info@abaadstudies.org

www.abaadstudies.org

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