

The Restoration of Self-Rule in South Yemen Is the Next Step Towards Independence

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South Yemen's Southern Transitional Council declared self-rule over the vast regions of the country that they claim as their own in response to the Saudi-backed Hadi government's repeated violations of last year's Riyadh Agreement that was aimed at de-escalating tensions between the nominally allied sides, thus representing the next step towards independence and one which couldn't have been made at a more strategically opportune moment.

Self-Rule As A Stepping Stone Towards Independence

Yemen is once again making headlines across the world after the Southern Transitional Council (STC) [declared self-rule](#) over the vast regions of the country that they claim as their own per their quest to restore sovereignty to the Old Cold War-era state of South Yemen. The separatist group stopped short of outright declaring independence, but few are under any illusions that this step isn't a means towards that eventual end. That scenario could have been avoided, however, had the Saudi-backed Hadi government not repeatedly violated last year's [Riyadh Agreement](#) that was aimed at de-escalating tensions between the nominally allied sides following the STC's liberation of Aden over the summer, which the author analyzed at the time in his piece about how "[South Yemen Is Already Functionally Independent Even If It's Not Recognized As Such](#)". The accord was supposed to have been a de-facto power-sharing agreement that would have seen the separatists incorporated into the state's official framework in order to satisfy most of their political demands for fairer representation of their home region that's been subjugated by the North since the South's defeat during the brief 1994 civil war.

Rubbishing The Riyadh Agreement

Hadi — and by extrapolation, his Saudi backers — had other plans, however, which were likely motivated by the desire to eliminate his only credible rivals under the cover of the Riyadh Agreement, naively hoping that they'd let their guard down during this time so that the government could take maximum advantage of the fragile peace. That was a terrible miscalculation in hindsight since it rested on the assumptions that Saudi Arabia would fully support Hadi's forces no matter the circumstances and that his representatives are popular enough to replace the STC in the aftermath of their planned power struggle, both of which couldn't have been more wrong. The STC is extremely popular among native Southerners and regarded by them as a government-in-waiting whose legitimacy is absolute, unlike the questionable domestic legitimacy of Hadi's internationally recognized authorities. The only conceivable scenario in which Hadi's Saudi-backed forces could retain control over South Yemen would be through the imposition of a brutal dictatorship that rules through state

terror, which is unsustainable for both practical and cost-related (financial, military, and humanitarian) reasons.

Perfect Timing

The very fact that it was attempted in spite of the obviousness of its inevitable failure speaks to just how desperate Hadi and his patrons have become. They received their comeuppance over the weekend after the STC declared self-rule and immediately began reasserting its authority over Aden, which couldn't have come at a more strategically opportune moment. Saudi Arabia is mired in uncertainty over its future following the [disastrous oil price war](#) that it launched against Russia in early March and which runs the risk of bankrupting the Kingdom. In fact, the Saudi Finance Minister recently announced that his country might take on [close to \\$60 billion in debt](#) by the end of the year in order to cover budget shortfalls from this crisis, which is a far cry from its formerly comfortable position of [posting yearly surpluses](#). Under these conditions, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) might understandably think twice about getting further caught in the quagmire of "mission creep" in Yemen by expanding his military campaign there to fully support Hadi's forces against the STC, especially considering just how badly he's already failed in this respect and also in terms of his original mission of dislodging the Ansarullah ("Houthis") from North Yemen despite half a decade of trying.

MBZ & MBS, Mentor & Mentee

Another factor for observers to keep in mind is that MBS is mentored by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ), his coalition ally in Yemen whose country also sponsors the STC. This adds an interesting angle to the context in which the STC's self-rule declaration was made. It can't be known for certain, but it's highly likely that the group coordinated this move with the UAE, which strongly suggests that MBZ is taking advantage of MBS' domestic difficulties in order to assert his smaller country as the real "big brother" in their bilateral relationship just like the role that he already fulfills for MBS on a personal level. Should MBZ be successful with this strategic coup by convincing his mentee that it's better for him to order Hadi to immediately begin Yemen's federal bifurcation instead of bearing the tremendous costs associated with militantly opposing the STC (provided of course that the group has firm security guarantees from the UAE in the event of a Saudi-backed counterattack), then the UAE would have in effect replaced Saudi Arabia as the most powerful Arab nation in the world.

Concluding Thoughts

It'll of course remain to be seen exactly how Saudi Arabia reacts to the latest developments in South Yemen, but there are convincing reasons to predict that it'll eschew a costly proxy war with the UAE in favor of working to promote a so-called "political solution" instead, which would have to result in the federal bifurcation of the country along North-South lines instead of just rehashing the Riyadh Agreement if it's to stand any chance of being accepted by the STC. The separatists crossed the Rubicon over the weekend but wouldn't have done so had their Emirati patrons opposed their dramatic move to declare self-rule over the regions of the country that they claim as their own, so it should be assumed that MBZ is in support of their declaration despite it obviously being disadvantageous to his Saudi mentee's geostrategic interests. MBS is therefore in a bind since both options available to him inevitably result in losing some degree of "face", so he's basically forced to choose between the "lesser of two evils", which in this case is submitting to the new on-the-ground

political reality created by the STC despite it greatly undermining the reason why he launched his war in the first place instead of fighting the Emirati-backed group and risking an irreconcilable rift with his mentor.

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