Ripple Effects from Yemen’s South Threaten Stability in Taiz

The Southern Transitional Council’s (STC) August 10 seizure of Aden and the internationally recognized government’s eviction from the interim capital threatens the delicate balance of security in Taiz governorate. In reaction to events in Aden, the Yemeni Islah party, which controls most state institutions in Taiz, fears a power grab by UAE-backed forces as the party views the takeover of Aden and its aftermath as a direct threat. This has led to violence between troops loyal to the government of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and factions backed by the UAE, some of which are affiliated with the former ruling party, the General People’s Congress (GPC). The clashes in the border area between Taiz and Lahj reveal fault lines between al-Islah and the GPC in the governorate. On August 20, 2019 negotiations put a halt to clashes among the various factions in the southernmost district al-Shamaytayn. However, tension remains high and the risk of renewed violent power struggles over the control of Taiz continues.

Al-Islah’s Exposure at its Southern Flank

State institutions in Taiz governorate have made steady progress in reestablishing security since 2017. Although the expulsion of the Abu al-Abbas brigade in April 2019 did not completely put an end to violence between formal and informal actors, it contributed significantly to political stabilization in Taiz, according to local civil society and security figures.

With the UAE-backed salafi Abu al-Abbas group out of Taiz, the city has become an Islah party stronghold and a beacon of support for the Hadi government. However, the conflict between al-Islah dominated institutions in Taiz and the Abu al-Abbas brigade has not been resolved, it has merely been pushed outside the city especially into the southwestern region of the governorate where al-Islah yields some of its control to UAE-backed forces. For example, the headquarters of the Abu al-Abbas brigade had been in al-Turbah, halfway between Taiz city and al-Shamayteen until August 20 2019 when they agreed to retreat to al-Kadaaha front around 30 km kilometers away, southwest of Taiz city.

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1 This fault line was already apparent during an EU-funded workshop in June 2019 organized by YPC in Taiz which brought together security officials affiliated with the different political factions represented in the city. It was clear that the two factions had little interest in improving cooperation, even refusing to sit next to each other during the meeting.
4 YPC interviews and focus groups with civil society and security figures, Taiz, between February 2018 and July 2019.
After the takeover of Aden by the STC on August 10, 2019, al-Islah felt vulnerable in Taiz due to its exposure in the south. The southernmost district of Taiz along the border with Lahj is strategically important as the only route in and out of Taiz city because of Ansarallah’s control of northeastern Taiz governorate and its continued siege on the city. However, al-Islah does not control the road connecting Taiz city with the southern district, nor does it control al-Shamayteen. Clashes broke out in the area in August between al-Islah-loyal forces and those affiliated with the UAE-backed camp of salafi and GPC forces.

As they have demonstrated earlier this year, the Abu al-Abbas faction is capable of cutting off this route, which consequently puts Taiz city under a complete siege. In addition, the 35th Brigade and Abu al-Abbas’ control in southern Taiz leaves the door open for attacks from UAE-backed southern and salafi armed groups from Lahj, Aden and Taiz governorate’s western coast.

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6 The 35th Yemeni Army Brigade is under the command of Brigadier General Adnan al-Hamadi, a Nasserist. The brigade is nominally part of the Hadi government security structure, but is close to Abu al-Abbas. The latter was designated as part of the 35th in the framework of the government’s integration efforts.
The head of the Islah party in Taiz, Abdo Farhan (aka Salim), said in a statement that the “liberation” of Taiz can only be accomplished if the internal front is cleared of traitors and foreign agents, a reference to groups supported by the UAE. He added that all liberated areas should comply with a unified military command led by the Taiz axis, affirming that “renegade” groups such as the 35th Brigade and Abu al-Abbas would not be tolerated.7

**UAE-backed Groups Eyeing Taiz**

UAE-backed troop buildup in al-Shamaytayn has stoked Islah’s fears that they will lose more control to the Abu al-Abbas group and other UAE-backed factions. As well, Islah remains concerned about connections between local District Security Chief Col. Abdulkarim al-Same’e and Tareq Saleh, the UAE-backed nephew of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. With the approval of the district security chief (Mudir Amn al-Mudiriya), during the first half of 2019, individuals from northern governorates, like Sana’a, al-Mahweet and Amran, began to rent houses and apartments in al-Shamaytayn. According to locals, most of these individuals appeared to be military or militia men.8

These individuals are assumed to belong to troops commanded by Tareq Saleh. In fact, residents recognized some of the individuals as part of the old Saleh-regime’s Presidential Guard, which entered into an alliance with Ansarallah in 2015, and later put Taiz city under siege.9

Al-Same’e, unlike most others holding state positions in Taiz, is not affiliated with the Islah party. His legitimacy comes from his part in the resistance against Ansarallah in 2015. Although Al-Same’e was appointed to his current position by Islah-affiliated Taiz Security Chief Mansour al-Akhal, he is now associated with UAE-backed factions among the GPC and salafi groups that oppose the dominance of al-Islah in the governorate.

**Al-Islah Moves to Consolidate Control**

A preemptive move to consolidate al-Islah’s grip on Taiz resulted in clashes along the road connecting Taiz city and al-Shamaytayn. The violence occurred between al-Islah forces loyal to Hadi and GPC-affiliates. Al-Islah attempted to utilize its control over state institutions to secure its hold of the southern district, when

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8 According to a local journalist 300 troops which until his death fought with former President Saleh live in this area. YPC interview with journalists with connections to local military structures in al-Turbah, Taiz, 19 August 2019.
9 YPC interview with residents in al-Turbah, Taiz, 15 August 2019 and 1 September 2019 and YPC interview with journalists with connections to local military structures in al-Turbah, Taiz, 19 August 2019.
on August 13, 2019, Taiz Security Chief (ar.: Mudir al-Amn) Gen. Mansour al-Akhalı issued a formal decree replacing the al-Shamaytayn Security Chief, al-Same’e. The decree was motivated by al-Same’e’s connections to Tareq Saleh, that he was sometimes a rogue operator and the fear that al-Shamaytayn could be a door for UAE-backed forces into Taiz. According to the decree, al-Same’e was posted as security chief to Sam’ district and to act as deputy security chief (Musa’d Mudir al-Amn) at the governorate level. General Abduckareem Qasem Ali al-Eryan, the Islah-affiliated security chief of al-Misrakh District, would take over al-Same’e’s position in al-Shamaytayn.

To enforce the decree, al-Akhalı travelled to al-Shamaytayn to handle the transfer of authority, which al-Same’e refused on the grounds of outstanding financial matters. Issuing such decrees is not in the authority of security chiefs; per law only the Ministry of Interior can release decrees to appoint district security chiefs. While al-Akhalı was in al-Same’e’s office, violence erupted outside the building between the two men’s guards.10 The clashes led to further troop movement and violence, adding pressure to al-Islah-dominated state institutions in Taiz.

UAE-backed Forces Coordinate Countermove

Revealing a degree of coordination between al-Same’e and UAE-backed forces, on August 15 the Abu al-Abbas group, in reaction to the clashes, closed off the road to al-Turbah in al-Shamaytayn to prevent military reinforcements coming from Taiz city. Al-Islah media reported that military support from Tareq Saleh’s forces was sent from the west coast, which Saleh controls, to southern Taiz. This support moved through the areas under the control of the Abu Al-Abbas faction.11

Countering Abu al-Abbas’ move, on the subsequent day, the Hadi-loyal 4th Brigade led by Brigadier General Abubakr al-Jabulı took control of the al-Bireen checkpoint in the Abu al-Abbas stronghold, cutting off the Abu al-Abbas brigade from their supply routes, and at the same time guaranteeing the roads between Taiz and al-Shamaytayn remained open in al-Turbah.

This triggered UAE-backed al-Amaliqa Commander, Brigadier General Hamdi Shukri al-Subaihi, to intervene. He demanded the opening of the supply routes, arguing that blocking Abu al-Abbas could expose the al-Kadaha front, a frontline with Ansarallah, which is controlled by the Abu al-Abbas group. The al-Amaliqa brigade is active on the west coast front and has no direct stake in Taiz. Being part of the

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west coast Joint Forces, the brigade is connected with Tareq Saleh, commander of the Republican Guards and other UAE-backed groups. The clashes led to a few dozen military and civilian casualties.\(^2\)

**Negotiations Establish Fragile Truce**

Attempts from Taiz Governor Nabil Shamsan\(^3\) on August 18 to pacify the clashes failed. His proposal entailed the withdrawal of forces loyal to Security Chief al-Akhal from al-Shamaytayn to Taiz city, the withdrawal of al-Same’e’s forces from al-Turbah city, and al-Same’e’s deputy to assume the responsibilities of district security chief. Once these three points were implemented, Taiz’s governor would proceed to appoint a new security chief. What followed was a partial implementation of the agreement, with al-Same’e keeping his forces in place and conflicting decrees from the governor and the Ministry of Interior regarding new district security chiefs.

It comes as no surprise that the governor’s proposal was not implemented; not even by state institutions he nominally has authority over. Given that institutions are dominated by al-Islah, the state in Taiz acts in the interest of the party and its military affiliates, rather than adhering to nominal state hierarchies. As a longtime member of the GPC, Shamsan is not affiliated with the Islah party and is rather associated with the opposing factions.

Because of its position of power, al-Islah can circumvent the governor when employing state institutions in its interests. Instead of political negotiations brokered by leading officials, it was an agreement that emerged from the armed groups, brokered by al-Amaliqa Commander al-Subaihi, that lead to a ceasefire breakthrough on August 20.

The Amaliqa brigade is UAE-backed, and at the same time loyal to President Hadi. Thus the brigade is widely perceived as neutral. Given they have no stake in Taiz, al-Amaliqa Commander al-Subaihi was accepted as a mediator in the negotiations. The commander arrived in southern Taiz accompanied by 45 military vehicles, which helped to compel conflicting factions to agree to mediation.\(^4\) This attempt was also more successful because those involved in the talks had actual leverage on the ground as opposed to Shamsan.

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\(^2\) The emergency and ambulance operations room in Taiz governorate reported to YPC that during clashes between August 12 and 17, nine gunmen were killed and 12 others were injured; while two civilians were killed and 13 were injured. On August 20 a mortar shell killed four children in the village of al-Hajar in the same district. YPC Communication with Emergency and Ambulance Service, Taiz, 7 September 2019.

\(^3\) For a biography of Nabil Shamsan, see Development Champions Website: [https://devchampions.org/about/team/nabil-shamsan](https://devchampions.org/about/team/nabil-shamsan) (accessed 6 September 2019).

\(^4\) YPC interview with residents in al-Turbah, Taiz, 2 September 2019 and YPC interview with journalists with connections to local military structures in al-Turbah, Taiz, 2 September 2019.
Media reported that al-Subahi was tasked by the Hadi government to mediate in the conflict, with Vice President and Islah-affiliate Ali Mohsin pushing Islah forces to agree to a deal. An initial agreement was reached on August 20, 2019. As a consequence, all armed forces, including the Islah forces and the Abu al-Abbas Brigade, withdrew from the al-Turbah area and handed over the al-Bireen check point to the Special Forces in Taiz, led by Brigadier General Jamil Aqlan. The latter is affiliated with the GPC and follows orders from Shamsan. While this deal reestablished a sense of stability, the situation remains fragile and the cracks within the anti-Ansarallah coalition have yet to be mended, both on local and regional levels.

16 YPC interview with residents in al-Turbah, Taiz, 2 September 2019 and YPC interview with journalists with connections to local military structures in al-Turbah, Taiz, 2 September 2019.

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