

Competition in al-Dhali': STC Takes the Upper Hand

Al-Dhali' is witnessing an institutional transformation that is unique to its geographical and political location. In its northern districts, state institutions are under Ansarallah control through the installation of supervisors (ar: *mushrif*) who have full authority. The border districts between north and south are contested and active war zones, where most state institutions have collapsed. Southern districts, as well as the city of al-Dhali', have come under the influence of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is competing with the internationally recognized government (IRG) to dominate the governorate. The STC and IRG are unified only at the northern front against Ansarallah. In reality, the STC is seeking to end the IRG's presence in al-Dhali'. For years the STC and those associated with the southern independence movement have struck a fine balance between serving the IRG, while also pursuing the interests of the southern movement. With the alliance becoming more fragile, the STC is pursuing increasingly independent, albeit risky strategies in al-Dhali'.

Al-Dhali' at the Intersection of North and South

Al-Dhali' governorate is located at the intersection of political and military fault lines on the border of the two formerly independent Yemeni states: the northern Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the southern People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The governorate was created after unification by a republican decree in 1998 under former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, combining districts from both states; the capital of al-Dhali' was a district in the PDRY, the northern districts were part of the YAR governorate of Ibb.¹ The governorate is also a current frontline between Ansarallah and the IRG. Yet, demonstrating the conflict's complexity, the areas outside of Ansarallah territory, often referred to as the "liberated areas," are not under IRG control. Predominantly based in exile in the Saudi capital Riyadh, the government of President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi has little leverage on the ground.

Since May 2017, the STC has claimed Aden as its capital, seeking to represent southern Yemen as a quasi-government within the borders of the pre-1990 independent state. Al-Dhali' is a backbone of the southern movement and opposition to Saleh's rule had been strong in the governorate. It saw frequent protests after Yemen's last multi-candidate presidential elections in 2006, when many southerners voted for Saleh's opponent, the candidate of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), Faisal bin Shamlan. Historically, al-Dhali' served as a recruiting ground for groups such as the National Liberation Front (NLF), which sought independence from British colonial rule in the 1960s, as well as for the PDRY military. Consequently, during the 1994 civil war, al-Dhali' was one of the main battlegrounds between north and south, and many southern military leaders hailed from the governorate.² Thus, al-Dhali' became one of the hot spots of the

¹ Al-Dhali' governorate was formed by Republican Decree No. 23 in 1998 under President Saleh after unification. The governorate consists of nine districts named: al-Jubn, al-Azariq, Qataba, Damt, al-Shuaib, al-Haseen, al-Dhali'a, Jahaf and al-Hashaa.

² Salisbury, Peter (2013) Yemen's Southern Intifada. *Foreign Policy*, 13 March 2013. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/13/yemens-southern-intifada/> (accessed 26 June 2019).

southern movement. The movement gained momentum in 2007, when forcibly retired officers from the former southern military demanded the government in Sanaa pay their pensions. Starting back in the 1990s, al-Dhali's southern movement factions were known for having a relatively more militant stance and are generally associated with former South Yemen President Ali Salem al-Beidh who followed a more radical policy than others in the movement. During Saleh's presidency, repression against the southern movement in al-Dhali' was ripe, with violent confrontations worsening after 2011.³

In February/March 2015, Ansarallah, through their alliance with the Republican Guard under Murad al-Ubli, advanced quickly southward toward al-Dhali' and Aden, where the northern forces initially met resistance from just a few military units. Despite the restructuring of the security sector during the transition period, President Hadi had little support within the security establishment, while the Saleh family's influence remained strong. With most security institutions falling into the hands of Ansarallah, President Hadi called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for assistance through military intervention. The onset of that Gulf military intervention, as well as Ansarallah's attempt to take control of southwestern Yemen, all while state security structures began to collapse, triggered the southern movement's transformation from a peaceful civil effort into the armed southern resistance. That resistance welcomed fighters from different tribes and backgrounds. Given that al-Dhali's southern movement had a tendency toward militancy and strong roots in PDRY military structures, al-Dhali's factions played an important role in the new armed southern resistance. In June 2015, the southern resistance initially pushed Ansarallah out of al-Dhali'. Unlike the liberation of Aden in July 2015, al-Dhali' resistance did so without significant support from Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates.⁴

Leaders of al-Dhali's southern movement are influential within Aden and the STC, like Shalal Ali Shaya, the security director of Aden, and Aidarus al-Zubaydi, the leader of the STC. When the STC was formed in May 2017, the southern movement's ambition to regain independence was gaining steam just as the Hadi government's absence had created a power vacuum. As well, the UAE had signaled a preference to work with the southern movement rather than al-Islah, Yemen's Sunni party composed of the Muslim Brotherhood and tribes. The council was championed by the southern movement's various factions and backed by the so-called Security Belt forces. The Security Belt was formed and funded by the UAE in March 2016 to secure the city of Aden and maintain the Emirates' economic and military interests in southern Yemen, particularly in the port of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.⁵

³ Salisbury, Peter (2018) "Yemen's Southern Powder Keg." Chatham House Research Paper March 2018.

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-03-27-yemen-southern-powder-keg-salisbury-final.pdf> (accessed 22 June 2019).

⁴ Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden," Policy Analysis, Washington Institute, July 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-saudi-uae-war-effort-in-yemen-part-1-operation-golden-arrow-in-aden> (accessed 22 June 2019).

⁵ Heras, Nicholas (2018), "Security Belt: the UAE's Tribal Counterterrorism Strategy in Yemen." *Terrorism Monitor* 16/12.

<https://jamestown.org/program/security-belt-the-uaes-tribal-counterterrorism-strategy-in-yemen/> (accessed 21 June 2019);

Gasim, Gamal (2018), "What is going on in southern Yemen?" Al-Jazeera, 29 January 2018.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/south-yemen-secession-aden-180129095311293.html> (accessed 21 June 2019).

Institutional Competition

The southern movement and the Hadi government compete over legitimacy across Yemen's south. The STC's particular strength in al-Dhali' is due to the conflict dynamics in the governorate, the southern movement's roots in al-Dhali' and the historically weak state presence in the area. At the onset of Yemen's civil war, al-Dhali' experienced heavy fighting between March and June 2015, when Ansarallah attempted to take control of Aden. The collapse of state security institutions and the consequent empowerment of the southern resistance forces hardened the southern movement's grip on the governorate. Although the IRG nominally controls state institutions in al-Dhali', such as the governor's office and the police, members of the southern movement rose within the ranks of the state and exercise de facto authority.

Many of those who've held positions within state structures over the last few years, including police officers, are loyal to the STC or are associated with the southern movement. This demonstrates the fine balance the two parties struck in their alliance; without recruiting southern movement members, the Hadi government would have lost the little influence it had in al-Dhali'. When it was in a slightly stronger position before the STC's power grab, the IRG was able to sanction individuals who were too candid in their allegiances to the STC or the southern movement. For instance, Fadhl al-Jaadi, a leading member of Yemen's Socialist Party (YSP) and al-Dhali' governor between 2015 and 2017, was replaced because of his role in the STC. Hadi installed General Ali Saleh Muqbil as al-Jaadi's successor, a military commander of the National Army who coordinated the military efforts against Ansarallah in al-Dhali's northern districts. While Muqbil has no direct connections with the STC, he belongs to the group of forcibly retired officers from the former southern military, and thus is associated with the core of the southern movement that works alongside the STC.⁶

Members of the southern movement and STC loyalists served Hadi and the IRG only to the extent that it does not hurt the southern movement's interests. While generally respecting the boundaries set by the Hadi government, the STC and its supporters penetrated state structures and employed them for their benefit. At times, the two sides work alongside each other. For example, in May 2019, the governor visited the frontline in northern al-Dhali', joined by local STC leader General Abdullah Mahdi Saeed, as well as al-Dhali' Chief of Police General Saleh Shaif.⁷ In late 2018, the governor gathered the governorate's security leaders in an effort to improve cooperation; the meeting ended with a visit to a Security Belt forces' camp where all factions present vowed to cooperate.

Since mid-2017, the STC has built various institutions, and in doing so, established itself even further as a quasi-government. The STC has governorate-level representative offices outside of Aden.⁸ The Security

⁶ "Muhafiz al-Dhali': Nizam Harb 94 wa 2015 lam Yaeud bi Maqdurih Ghazw al-Janub." Al-Ayyam, July 26, 2018.

<https://en.stcaden.com/news/8123> (accessed 21 June 2019).

⁷ "Muhafiz al-Dhali' Warayiys al-Majlis al-Eintiqalii Yazuron al-Qoutut al-A'amamia li Jabhat al-Azarq." al-Ameen press, May 24, 2019. <https://alameenpress.info/news/12570> (accessed 10 January 2020).

⁸ "President Al-Zubaidi Issues a Resolution Completing the Formation of the STC Local Headquarters in Al-Dhali'." STC official website, January 13, 2018. <https://en.stcaden.com/news/8123> (accessed 21 June 2019).

Belt and the southern resistance are the military wings of the STC. Military leaders from the Security Belt and southern resistance agreed that both forces are united in interest and receive their commands from the STC.⁹ A large part of al-Dhali' and its state institutions, including the police, is de facto under the control of the STC and its armed supporters.¹⁰ It is revealing that residents of al-Dhali' and YPC researchers viewed the southern forces, such as the resistance, the Security Belt and the STC, as state actors, demonstrating the influential position of the STC in the governorate. Moreover, when the respondents were asked about whom they trust to maintain security in al-Dhali', they unanimously referred to the STC.

Competition Turns Violent

Due to its location at the frontline with Ansarallah, al-Dhali' is the only governorate where al-Islah fighters backed by the IRG are in battle alongside the southern resistance and STC affiliates. This is a unique constellation given the active hostilities between the STC and the al-Islah party, with each side trying to assassinate leaders of the other with more frequency. The most prominent assassination occurred on October 2019 of al-Dhali' al-Islah leader Zaki al-Saqladi. Since April 2019, violence at the frontline in al-Dhali' has flared up again as Ansarallah shifted its military focus back to the governorate. It had been pushed out of all al-Dhali' districts except Damt following the Stockholm Agreement of December 2018. According to YPC researchers' field observations, Ansarallah regained control over the northern districts, namely Juban, Qataba and al-Husha.¹¹

Ansarallah's advances drove al-Islah and STC forces further apart. The latter accused the former of coordinating with Ansarallah with the ultimate goal of weakening the STC and enabling al-Islah to take over Aden.¹² Thus, tension not only resurged at the front, but among the nominal allies – the STC and the IRG with its al-Islah fighters. IRG and STC forces finally turned against one another in May 2019, after the IRG sent the Presidential Guard to the al-Dhali' front to fight Ansarallah. Confrontations with STC forces forced the Presidential Guard to return to Aden.¹³

The UAE continued to support STC forces during this period. The UAE-supported Security Belt would arrest military leaders not affiliated with the STC. As well, UAE-supported forces from Tihama were transferred to al-Dhali'. Unlike STC forces, UAE-backed forces from Tihama on Yemen's western coast were experienced in fighting Ansarallah. They were supposed to boost the STC's anti-Ansarallah campaign without having to rely on IRG support.

⁹ Interview with a leader of the southern resistance conducted in al-Dhali' by YPC on 12 April 2019; Interview with two leaders of the Security Belt conducted in al-Dhali' by YPC on 24 April 2019.

¹⁰ Interview with a leader of the Security Belt conducted in al-Dhali' by YPC on 24 April 2019.

¹¹ Observations made by a YPC field researcher team in Qataba and al-Hasha districts, al-Dhali', 27 April 2019.

¹² "al-Islah Yudashin Maerakat al-Saytara Alaa Aden Bitaslim al-Dhali'e li Al-Houthiin." al-Janoob al-Youm, March 31, 2019.

<http://www.aljanoobalyoum.net/19803/> (accessed 21 June 2019).

¹³ "Qiadat 'alwiat al-Himaya al-Riyasia Tosdir Tawdihaan bi khsws Eishtibakat al-Dhali'." Aden al-Ghed, May 8, 2019.

<https://www.adengd.net/news/384656/> (accessed 10 January 2020).

Meanwhile, an increasing number of political and military assassinations and attacks were carried out by the various factions in al-Dhali' city during 2019. One such attack in December targeted the headquarters of seven international organizations operating in the city, which led to the suspension of their work in al-Dhali' governorate.

Despite UAE support, STC forces have not been able to push Ansarallah out of al-Dhali'. Still, its interest in ending the IRG-Islah presence in the governorate exceeds its interest in ridding the governorate completely of Ansarallah. Unlike the IRG, which wants to regain as much territory from Ansarallah as possible, the STC is satisfied with liberating those parts of al-Dhali' which historically were part of South Yemen. The tension between the IRG and STC culminated in violent confrontations in Aden in August 2019, which led to the STC expelling the IRG from the city. After the Riyadh Agreement negotiations in fall 2019, the two sides once again find themselves at a stalemate, with al-Dhali' remaining a battlefield.

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