

BREAKING POINT? YEMEN'S SOUTHERN QUESTION

Middle East Report N°114 – 20 October 2011

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BREAKING POINT? YEMEN'S SOUTHERN QUESTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ten months of popular protest spiked by periodic outbursts of violence have done little to clarify Yemen's political future. Persistent street protests so far have failed to oust President Ali Abdullah Saleh or bring about genuine institutional reform. The country is more deeply divided between pro- and anti-Saleh forces than ever, its economy is in tatters and both security and humanitarian conditions are deteriorating. Amid the uncertainty fuelled by this lingering crisis, the country's unity – and notably the status of the South – hangs in the balance. Old grievances are coming into sharper relief and, among some, secessionist aspirations are gaining steam. There remains an opportunity for Yemen's rulers, opposition groups and protesters to reach agreement on a political transition that would give priority to the Southern question and redefine relations between centre and periphery, for example by moving toward a federal model. Should this chance be missed, the conflict risks getting bloodier. And Yemen's unity could be a thing of the past.

The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) merged with its northern neighbour, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), on 22 May 1990 to form the Republic of Yemen. From the start, this was a troubled unification that resulted in a short, bloody civil war in 1994. The North emerged victorious, but this hardly closed the chapter. In the wake of the conflict, two profoundly different narratives took shape. Under one version, the war laid to rest the notion of separation and solidified national unity. According to the other, the war laid to rest the notion of unity and ushered in a period of Northern occupation of the South.

The most recent tensions did not suddenly erupt in the context of the January 2011 Yemeni uprising. In 2007, a broad-based popular protest movement known as the Southern Movement (Al-Hiraak al-Janoubi) had come to the fore. The Hiraak originated as a rights-based movement requesting equality under the law and a change in relations between North and South – all within a united country. The government responded to the demands with repression; it also largely ignored its own promises of reforms. By 2009, the Hiraak had begun to champion Southern independence. In the months leading up to the

uprising that became the Yemeni Spring, its influence and popularity in the South clearly were on the ascent.

Could the popular uprising open up fresh opportunities to peacefully resolve the Southern issue? If the various sides act reasonably, it should. From the start, it facilitated cooperation between Northern and Southern protesters and broke through barriers of fear, allowing a larger spectrum of Southerners to join the national public debate on the status of the South. Most importantly, it has facilitated debate and growing consensus around federal options. If political foes can reach agreement on a transition of power in Sanaa and launch an inclusive national dialogue, they could seize the moment to negotiate a peaceful compromise on the Southern issue as well.

The problem is that there is no indication Yemen is heading there. Instead, as mass protests have continued without result, frustration has grown and so too has Southern distrust that anything that happens in the North will improve their lot. The risks are many. An enduring political impasse could prompt further collapse of security and economic conditions throughout the country, producing greater unrest and instability in the South. Alternatively, a full-fledged civil war could break out between Northern rival elites, a scenario that could prompt Southern stakeholders to pursue a serious bid for separation. Already, the early euphoria generated by coordination between protesters in the North and South is giving way to resurgent calls by some for Southern independence.

This is a dangerous brew. The South's secession almost certainly would be resisted by the North and could spark a violent conflict. Any effort toward independence also could trigger in-fighting and additional fragmentation within the South itself. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and other violent groups already are prospering amid growing instability and chaos; further deterioration would only expand their reach.

A clear path toward a redefinition of relations between centre and periphery is badly needed. This can only be achieved through an inclusive dialogue that recognises Southerners' legitimate grievances and the importance of profoundly amending that relationship. Four possible out-

comes are being discussed in various forums, with varying degrees of popularity: maintenance of a unitary state albeit with improved government performance; maintenance of a unitary state but with significant powers devolved to local governments; a federal state consisting of two or more regions; and Southern secession.

Of these, the first and last are the more likely recipes for heightened conflict. The former (a kind of status quo plus) would essentially ignore Southerners' legitimate demands for greater participation, control of local resources and protection of local identity and culture. The latter (Southern independence) would alienate not only Northerners but also many Southerners who strongly prefer reform within the context of unity.

That leaves the two middle options. Both have their problems. Hiraak supporters suspect that a mere strengthening of local government powers – even under a more democratic and representative central government – could be a subterfuge and fail to truly protect Southerners' rights. For this and other reasons, they favour either immediate separation or, at a minimum, a federation of two states lasting four to five years, to be followed by a referendum on the South's ultimate status.

On the other hand, federalism, especially under a two-state formula (one Northern, the other Southern), is eyed by many with considerable suspicion as only the first step toward the South's eventual separation. Some form of multi-state federalism, with perhaps four or seven regions, potentially could allay those anxieties. It has found relatively wider appeal in the North and arguably could gain traction even within staunchly pro-unity parties, such as the ruling General People's Congress and the opposition Islamist party, Islah. But much more precision about the details of this model will be required before it does so. Overall, none of these fears ought to be brushed aside or downplayed. Instead, they should be aired openly and discussed seriously through robust debate and peaceful negotiations.

External players, including the Gulf Cooperation Council members, the U.S., the UK, the EU and the UN, have a role to play. All officially support a unified Yemen. But that is an umbrella broad enough to accommodate the need for Yemenis to comprehensively renegotiate the relationship between the central government and regional entities.

Yemen's upheaval presents a rare opportunity to redefine its flawed and failed political compact. At the same time, however, it has considerably raised the price of inaction. If nothing is done soon to peacefully address both national and Southern deep-seated grievances, a darker and more ominous chapter could yet be written.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To all Yemeni political stakeholders:

1. Agree immediately upon and implement a transition that facilitates a broadly inclusive national dialogue aimed at revising the existing political and social contract.

To the Yemeni Government:

2. Take immediate confidence-building measures to calm tensions in the South, including halting violence against peaceful demonstrators, releasing political prisoners, investigating alleged abuses, allowing human rights and humanitarian agencies full access to southern governorates, and removing controversial Northern military/security personnel, replacing them with Southern members of the security forces.

To the (ruling) General People's Congress:

3. Acknowledge publicly the Southern issue as legitimate and commit to finding a just solution through national dialogue and negotiations.
4. Accept a special status for the Southern issue in the national dialogue, ensuring that it will be addressed both separately and as part of a larger package of reforms.
5. End inflammatory rhetoric against "separatists" and instead embrace dialogue and debate over a broad range of decentralisation options.
6. Prepare for dialogue by educating and canvassing supporters on a range of options, including federalism.

To the (opposition) Yemeni Socialist Party:

7. Continue to promote compromise positions, such as a form of federalism, that could bridge the gap between the Hiraak and staunchly pro-unity parties like the General People's Congress and Islah.

To the (opposition) Islah:

8. Accept a special status for the Southern issue in the national dialogue, ensuring that it will be addressed both separately and as part of a larger package of reforms.
9. Allow Southerners within the party to take the lead in formulating policy on the South and present them as Islah's public face there, replacing in this capacity controversial Northern leaders.

To Northern Protesters:

10. Continue to publicly acknowledge the Southern issue as legitimate and accept its special status in a national dialogue.
11. Continue to reach out to Southern protesters, especially in the Hiraak, to find common ground and gain an understanding of their grievances and their preferred ways to address them.
12. Reaffirm commitment to peaceful protest and, if the opportunity arises, participate in a national dialogue on the Southern issue.

To the Hiraak:

13. End inflammatory “in group, out group” labels that stereotype Northerners as occupiers and end attempts to label Southerners based on their preference for separation or unity.
14. Continue internal dialogue within the movement and with other Southerners to further clarify and articulate a range of policy options.
15. Accept a diversity of opinions within the South and be open to discussing solutions short of separation.

To Members of the International Community:

16. Continue to pressure both the regime and the opposition to move forward immediately with a peaceful political transition.
17. Support a special status for the Southern issue in a national dialogue through public statements and increased engagement with Southern activists, including the Hiraak.
18. Increase humanitarian assistance to Southern governorates affected by ongoing violence, particularly Abyan and Aden, and pressure the Yemeni government to provide full access to these areas.

Sanaa/Brussels, 20 October 2011

BREAKING POINT? YEMEN'S SOUTHERN QUESTION

I. INTRODUCTION

The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) merged with its northern neighbour, the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR), on 22 May 1990 to form the Republic of Yemen. Their unification was troubled from the start and ultimately resulted in a short but bloody civil war in 1994. Yet, the North's victory did not close the chapter on unity. Today many politicians, journalists, and activists refer to the "Southern issue" (*al-qadiya al-janoubiya*),¹ a term that means different things to different groups, depending on their interpretation of history and preferred outcomes.

A minority, generally from the North and including government officials, deny there even is a "Southern issue". They insist that Yemen's unity was sealed by the civil war and that the main problems in the South – unemployment, poverty, land right violations and inadequate services – exist in the North as well. They see no difference between the entities and regard those leading the call for separation as a small band of criminals seeking personal gain. For many others, particularly Southerners, the term is short-hand for lingering problems emanating from a hasty unification and subsequent civil war that triggered unique grievances and feelings of marginalisation. For still others, it is synonymous with a legitimate, legal claim for separation. Under this view, the civil war nullified the unity agreement between the two states, the South has become occupied territory, and continuation of unity would require new accords between two sovereign states.² There is no consensus on a solution, and various actors have proposed different models to address the problem, ranging from strong local governance to federalism and all the way to separation.

¹ The Southern issue (*al-qadiya al-janoubiya*) could also be translated as the Southern case, cause or question.

² The "South" in this report refers to the territories of the former PDRY. Roughly, this includes seven of Yemen's current governorates: Aden, Lahj, Dalia, Abyan, Shebwa, Hadramawt and Mahra. However, current governorate lines only roughly approximate the old border. Part of the al-Baydah governorate was in the PDRY, and the northern portion of Dalia governorate belonged to the YAR.

II. ONE STATE OR TWO?

A. TWO STATES, TWO SYSTEMS, ONE GOAL: UNITY

Prior to unification, Yemen consisted of two independent states.³ Before gaining its independence in 1967, the South had been a British colony; its rulers focused on the lucrative port of Aden, with little attention to developing its rural hinterlands. Under the PDRY, the Arab world's only self-proclaimed Marxist state, the state controlled the economy, banned opposition parties and severely curtailed freedom of speech and movement. At the same time, citizens benefited from subsidised basic commodities and services, and significant gains were made in literacy and education.⁴

³ During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prior to the emergence of two states, the British controlled parts of the South (from 1839 to 1967), while a religious imamate and the Ottomans vied for power in the North. The British directly governed the port of Aden, while forming loose alliances with local rulers (sultans) in the hinterland. Since the ninth century, parts of North Yemen were governed by a Zaydi imamate, whose rulers claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad. (Zaydism is a form of Shiite Islam that is distinct from the more commonly known Twelver Shiism prevalent in contemporary Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and Bahrain. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°86, *Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb* (27 May 2009), pp. 2, 7-9.) The Ottomans competed with Zaydi rulers for territorial control during two different periods. In the sixteenth century, they conquered parts of the North, only to be driven out by the Zaydi Qasimi dynasty in the seventeenth century. The Qasimi is the only dynasty that controlled most of the territory occupied by modern day Yemen. The Ottomans once again gained control of parts of the North from 1837 until 1918, only to withdraw in the wake of World War I. From 1918 to 1934, Imam Yahya strengthened his grip over North Yemen. In 1934, the treaty of Sanaa between Yahya and the British formally established the administrative frontier between their two spheres of influence. For a detailed discussion of Yemen's modern and early history, see Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 1-57. See also Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago and London, 2008), pp. 22-49.

⁴ By 1976-1977, 60 per cent of ten-year-olds in the South were in school, compared with 30 per cent in the North. The South

Throughout its short 22 years, the PDRY was plagued by internal conflict. Though tribalism was formally banned and tribal surnames eliminated, in practice regional and tribal rivalries endured, resulting in bouts of bloody fighting. Most notorious was the 1986 civil war, in which thousands – some estimates go as high as 10,000 – were killed in ten days of pitched street battles. These pitted supporters of Ali Naser Muhammad, then PDRY president and today a prominent member of the exiled Southern opposition, against an opposing faction within the ruling socialist party. After assassinating much of the Politburo, Ali Naser's followers eventually were defeated, and at least 30,000 of them fled north, where they formed an alliance with President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Ali Naser group, nicknamed the Zumra, comes primarily from Abyan and Shebwa governorates, while their rivals, the Tughma, are mostly from Dalia and Lahj. Divisions between the Zumra and Tughma remain an important political cleavage until today.

The northern Yemen Arab Republic was established after a coup overthrew the Zaydi imamate in 1962. In turn, this sparked a gruelling eight-year civil war that opposed the imam's royalists, supported by Saudi Arabia, against republicans, supported by Egypt. When the war ended, the country was in desperate need of socio-economic development and modern state institutions. The contrast with the South was stark: despite significant strides in building its bureaucracy, infrastructure and economy in the 1970s and 1980s, the North continued to lag behind the PDRY in education, literacy and basic social services. Unlike the South, the North enjoyed a nominally free-market economy and relatively greater political freedoms.

Like its Southern counterpart, however, the YAR faced continuous political instability. The civil war dominated the 1960s, followed by a series of coups and assassinations during the subsequent decade. In 1978, Ali Abdullah Saleh, a little known military officer, seized power. After fending off a coup attempt and defeating a socialist insurgency with the help of Islamist allies, his reign ushered in a period of relative stability.⁵ Saleh consolidated control over the military/security apparatus through a network of familial and tribal alliances, and he used the country's only legal party, the General People's Congress (GPC), as a wide-reaching patronage network. In 1984, the Texas-based Hunt company discovered oil in commercial quantities in

the border governorate of Marib, boosting the YAR's economic prospects.

Throughout this period, unification was widely popular among both populations. Nationalist sentiment favouring a unified nation began in the 1920s and 30s.⁶ While North and South experienced different forms of rule during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were intimately connected by trade and labour migration.⁷ In short, prior to the independence movements of the 1960s, there was existing precedent and historical/cultural material available for constructing one state, two states (based on the colonial boundaries) or even multiple states (especially given the relative independence of the southern hinterland in comparison with the port of Aden).

Under the period of separate nation states, Yemenis from both the North and South recall popular sentiment for unity. According an academic who currently supports separation, "before 1990, the people of the South completely supported the idea of unity. Under the PDRY, they were constantly surrounded by pro-unity messaging in schools. They would recite pro-unity slogans each day".⁸ Capitalising on and encouraging pro-unity sentiment, leaders of both states publicly praised the idea, yet, as an observer put it, "relations between the two Yemens swung wildly between conflict, even war, at the one extreme, and agreements for Yemeni unification, at the other".⁹ The two sides fought border wars in 1972 and 1979, both of which ended in unification talks. The PDRY also supported the 1970s socialist insurgency in the North, which President Saleh crushed in 1982. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, both states harboured each other's political enemies.

⁶ This was evident in a variety of songs, poetry and stories from that time.

⁷ By the 1950s, Aden in particular had become a hub for inter-regional and global exchange of information and ideas. Nationalists also drew on the historical appeal of the term Yemen (*Yaman*), which in reality is significantly older than either modern-day notions of a single Yemen or the two independent nation-states of the 1960s. In the *hadith* (Traditions of the Prophet Mohammad) *Yaman* refers to the territories south of Mecca. Nationalists also pointed to an early historical precedent for a unified Yemen in the Qasimi dynasty, which ruled over an area roughly equivalent to modern day Yemen in the mid-seventeenth century. Finally, they could also claim that no official border existed between North and South until 1905, when the British colonial power insisted on demarcating the boundary. See Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, op. cit., pp. 22-49.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, Adeni academic, Aden, June 2011.

⁹ See Robert Burrowes, "The Republic of Yemen: The Politics of Unification and Civil War, 1989-1995", in Michael Hudson (ed.), *Middle East Dilemma: The Politics and Economics of Arab Integration* (New York, 1999), p. 188.

had a literacy rate of 40 per cent, while the North's was 20 per cent. Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, op. cit., p. 140.

⁵ Under the YAR, all opposition political parties were banned, yet the Muslim Brotherhood was active underground. From the beginning of his tenure, Saleh formed a close alliance with the group against socialist insurgents in "middle Yemen", an area in the geographic south of the YAR.

By the late 1980s, the PDRY faced a growing crisis, a consequence of the civil war, loss of Soviet patronage and a devastated economy. The North, by contrast, enjoyed a comparatively stronger political and economic position. This formed the backdrop to the 1990 unification.¹⁰

B. UNIFICATION AND THE 1994 CIVIL WAR

Although the precise reasons behind the timing of unification are beyond this report's scope, they largely were related to the end of the Cold War and the quasi-simultaneous discovery of oil in the border regions, which provided incentives to cooperate on further exploration. Moreover, both President Saleh and the Southern president, Ali Salim al-Beedh, believed that they could capitalise on popular support for unification to buttress their respective political positions.¹¹ Immediately before the merger, federalism and confederation appeared to enjoy broad support among political leaders from both sides, who believed unification should be incremental rather than immediate.¹²

To the disappointment and surprise of his colleagues in the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP), al-Beedh, today one of separation's strongest proponents, advocated an immediate and full merger.¹³ The unification agreement signed in 1989 established an equal partnership between the two states, despite the North's significantly larger population and, at the time, brighter economic prospects.¹⁴ It also established a 50-50 power-sharing arrangement between the General People's Congress and Yemeni Socialist Party at all levels of government during a transitional period, which was followed by democratic, multi-party parliamentary elections in 1993. A five-man presidential council, with Saleh as president and Ali Salim as vice president, served as the government's executive body.

Almost as soon as the unification accord was signed, problems emerged. In practice, the two states never fully merged during the transitional period. Although some Southern military units were moved north and vice versa, both sides essentially retained their armies. Neither party made

much effort to streamline and genuinely combine state finances or the public sector. Equally significant, political tensions immediately flared between the YSP and GPC. The YSP experienced a series of political assassinations, which it promptly blamed on Saleh and his Islamist allies.¹⁵ The results of the 1993 elections shattered the 50-50 power-sharing agreement, with the YSP winning a meagre 56 of 301 parliamentary seats compared to the GPC's 123 and 62 for the newly formed Islamist party, the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (Islah).¹⁶ The elections in effect marginalised the YSP and placed power squarely in the hands of Northern tribal and Islamist elites. As tensions soured, civil war broke out on 27 April 1994.

The conflict was between elites rather than a war between two peoples. Prior to and during the fighting, civil society activists in both North and South mobilised against the war. The most prominent effort was led by the northern-based Yemeni National Dialogue of Popular Forces, which also included a broad range of Southern social figures. It produced, just prior to the conflagration, a "Document of Pledge and Accord" that many still refer to as a roadmap that could have mended the initial unification agreement's deficiencies and placed the country on a path toward stability and North-South partnership. The document pro-

¹⁵ Beginning in 1991 and for approximately two years, a series of political assassinations targeted YSP leaders. At the time, it was not clear who was behind the attacks, but later evidence suggests they were carried out by Yemeni veterans of the Afghan war, many with close links to the Northern security services. See Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided*, op. cit., pp. 188-189.

¹⁶ Islah was established shortly after the 1990 unification by the late preeminent sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation, Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar. (There are two main confederations in the North: Hashid and Bakil.) It has its roots in North Yemen and today contains a number of overlapping groups and tendencies, including tribesmen, businessmen, members of the centrist Muslim Brotherhood and militant Salafists. From 1990 until 1997, Islah was more of a partner to the ruling GPC than a genuine opposition party. In the 1997 parliamentary elections, after the Yemeni Socialist Party had been marginalised and the GPC turned its energies to weakening its Islamist opponents, Islah began to assume a more oppositional stance. For more information on Islah's diverse membership and evolving relationship with the ruling party, see Jillian Schwedler, "The Islah Party in Yemen: Political Opportunities and Coalition Building in a Transitional Polity", in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2004), pp. 205-228; Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and in Yemen* (Cambridge, 2006); April Longley, "The High Water Mark of Islamist Politics? The Case of Yemen", *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 61, no. 2 (Spring 2007), pp. 240-260; Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, op. cit., pp. 159-160; and Amr Hamzawy, "Between Government and Opposition: The Case of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform", Carnegie Working Paper (Washington, 2009).

¹⁰ For an analysis of the YAR's comparatively stronger position at the time of unity, see *ibid.*, pp. 197-198.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, pp. 197-199, for a detailed analysis of the motives behind unification.

¹² Crisis Group interview, Haydar al-Attas, prominent Southern technocrat and politician who was president of the PDRY in 1986-1990 and the Republic of Yemen's first prime minister, Cairo, 17 July 2011.

¹³ For a detailed account of pre-unification negotiations, see Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided: The Story of a Failed State in South Arabia* (London and New York, 2011), pp. 168-182.

¹⁴ At the time of unification the North's population was approximately 11 million against the South's 2.5 million. Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, op. cit., p. 186.

posed a new constitutional order comprising a bicameral legislature with equal representation for each region in the upper house, limits on executive authority and substantive political and fiscal decentralisation. It also recommended steps to depoliticise the military/security apparatus.¹⁷ It was signed by Ali Abdullah Saleh and Ali Salim al-Beedh in Jordan on 20 February 1994, only hours before a skirmish broke out between Northern and Southern troops in Abyan governorate.

The war lasted scarcely two months from its official beginning in late April, leaving between 5,000 and 7,000 dead.¹⁸ The Northern army, supported by Ali Naser loyalists and Islamist militias,¹⁹ immediately established military superiority in the Southern governorates of Abyan and Shebwa, while Southern brigades located in the North were quickly neutralised. On 21 May, al-Beedh announced creation of the Democratic Republic of Yemen (DRY), but Aden and Mukulla fell in early July, sealing victory for the North.²⁰

After the war, Southerners soon felt the sting of defeat. Aden was sacked by the Northern army, Ali Naser loyalists and Islamist/tribal militias. Private homes and land were confiscated, often by their pre-1986 tenants, and the UN estimated damage to Aden to be \$200 million.²¹ The regime in Sanaa fired top Southern military commanders and eventually retired many others in both the army and the civil service. The YSP was decimated, and many of its members later joined the GPC. Among Southerners, the war was perceived as a victory for Ali Naser's group, whose members hailed mostly from Abyan and Shebwa governorates, and a defeat for the military officers and

politicians from Dalia²² and Lahj governorates, who had prevailed in the 1986 civil war.²³

¹⁷ For details on the Document of Pledge and Accord as well as civic activism to prevent war, see Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen: The Political Economy of Activism in Modern Arabia* (Cambridge, 1998), chapter 7.

¹⁸ Michael C. Hudson, "Bipolarity, Rational Calculation and War in Yemen", in Jamal S. al-Suwaidi (ed.), *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences* (Abu Dhabi, 1996), p. 21.

¹⁹ Southerners often recount the prominent role Islamist militias played during both the civil war and the sacking of Aden. These militias were composed largely of Arab Afghans (Yemenis who had fought in the U.S.-funded campaign to drive Soviet troops from Afghanistan in the 1980s) with close ties to the Sanaa regime and the Islah party. However, Paul Dresch, an anthropologist, points out that the highest estimates of the number of Islamist fighters was 5,000 and that the bulk of the fighting was done by Northern army conscripts. See, *A History of Modern Yemen*, op. cit., p. 196.

²⁰ Noel Brehony, *Yemen Divided*, op. cit., pp. 195-196.

²¹ Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, op. cit., p. 57. For accounts of looting and land grabs, see also Carapico, "From Ballot Box to Battlefield: The War of the Two Alis", *Middle East Report* (September-October 1994), p. 27; and Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, op. cit., pp. 196-198.

²² The Dalia governorate was created after unification. The southern part of Dalia formally belonged to the PDRY, while the northern parts were in the YAR. The southern part of Dalia is now a stronghold of the Hiraak.

²³ For a detailed account of the causes and consequences of the civil war, see Jamal S. al-Suwaidi (ed.), *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences* (Abu Dhabi, 1996).

III. RE-EMERGENCE OF THE SOUTHERN ISSUE

A. TWO POST-WAR NARRATIVES

After the war, two narratives began to take shape. Under one version, the 1994 war closed the file on separation and solidified unity. The small group of Southern separatists were defeated, and the central government allegedly worked hard to encourage economic development in the South and integrate Southerners into the governing structure. Proponents of this view claim that Southerners have been fully included and routinely occupy important ministerial positions, including that of prime minister and oil minister. They look back on PDRY days as a period of bloody repression, when citizens' lives were characterised by fear, severe scarcity and lack of investment and economic development. In contrast, they contend, unity brought democracy, freedom of speech, investment and economic revitalisation.

In this view, the heart of the South's problem is economic, as indeed it is throughout the country. If there is any difference between North and South, it is only that Southerners were more dependent on the state before unification. They expected jobs, housing and subsidised goods and were disillusioned by the quick change to a free-market economy. Those currently leading the call for separation are – still according to this narrative – former PDRY leaders who lost their positions after the 1994 war and are now exploiting economic hardships throughout the South to incite support for secession. As for the youth supporting calls for separation, they are described as too young to recall the difficulties and repression of the PDRY period and as victims of propaganda from power-hungry Southern elites.

An opposing narrative frames the war of 1994 as the end of unity and the beginning of Northern occupation. According to this account, Southerners became second-class citizens at best and, at worst – and in its proponents' words – slaves of the Northern elites. Northern occupiers are said to have plundered Southern lands, as well as oil, mineral and fish wealth. Likewise, Northerners purportedly purged Southern civil servants and military personnel and subjected them to blatant discrimination in private-sector employment. Aden was looted and robbed, its port and free zone, potentially lucrative money-makers, racked by mismanagement and corruption. In addition to resource plundering and job discrimination, adherents of this narrative accuse the North of attacking the South's allegedly more secular and open culture through a dual-pronged strategy of re-tribalisation and Islamisation.

Accordingly, the Saleh regime is blamed for allowing its political partner during the war, Islah, to dominate poli-

tics in Aden and Islah's Salafi wing to establish mosques and madrasas throughout the South. Islah's conservative interpretation of Islam runs counter to Aden's relative openness as well as to the Sufism prevalent in Hadramawt.²⁴ In addition to facilitating Islah's ascendancy over the YSP, the regime is said to have embarked on a deliberate policy of re-tribalisation. Tribal surnames were reintroduced, sheikhs from the pre-socialist period returned to reclaim their lands and privileged positions, and the regime appointed new sheikhs as part of Saleh's trademark patronage-based divide-and-rule tactics. All in all, according to this narrative, the North plundered the South's resources, repressed its people, destroyed its state and threatened its identity.

These two narratives – which were reflected in approximately 150 Crisis Group interviews with Yemeni government officials, opposition groups and civil society activists in Sanaa, Aden and Cairo between September 2010 and July 2011 – are deeply entrenched. Unsurprisingly, the first description, prevalent in the North, is more commonly provided by government personnel, especially when speaking in an official capacity. The second is expressed especially by Southerners, particularly those who live in the South and/or have lost their jobs or land after the 1994 war. Both accounts contain elements of truth and exaggeration.²⁵ For example, the Yemeni government moved quickly to rebuild the South's infrastructure following the war;²⁶ indeed, very little had been built or maintained during the PDRY period.²⁷ Moreover, by 2001, the South received its fair share of development funds and more than its share of private sector investments per capita.

²⁴ Hadramawt is Yemen's largest governorate – 64,590 square miles, approximately 37 per cent of the country's total land area. The governorate has a relatively small population: according to 2004 census data, 1,028,556 (5 per cent of the country's total population). It boasts a significant portion of the country's proven oil reserves: in 2010, its block 14 contained 19.9 per cent, according to Yemen's Petroleum Exploration Production Authority website. It also has a long coastline, fish wealth, a rich mercantile tradition and particularly strong sense of sub-regional identity (see below). Population and land area statistics taken from the Gulf 2000 Project website, http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Yemen_Demography_ig.jpg. For an overview of official Yemeni oil and gas statistics, see www.pepa.com.ye/Production%20Activities/production%20activities.htm#Oil&GasReserve.

²⁵ In between these two dominant narratives fall perspectives that blend parts of each.

²⁶ See Floor Beuming, "The Merger of the Dagger and the Rifle: Failing Integration of former South Yemen into the Unified Republic of Yemen", MA thesis (University of Amsterdam, 2004), p. 85.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, group of Adeni residents, Aden, June 2011.

Yet, there also is evidence that Southerners did not enjoy equal access to government jobs and private sector employment.²⁸ Top military and security positions overwhelmingly went to Northerners, and, despite promises to the contrary, the government began to disarm the Southern army, allowing soldiers to collect their salaries but preventing them from reporting to duty.²⁹ In addition, centralisation of government ministries and private sector offices in Sanaa put Southerners at a natural employment disadvantage. Given the South's comparatively larger pre-unification bureaucracy and the GPC's post-war efforts to purge YSP members from government ranks, Southerners also suffered more from post-war civil service cuts.³⁰ It is equally true that the regime allowed its supporters, both Northern and Southern, to acquire prime Southern real estate either for free or at cut-rate prices.³¹ Although Southerners occupy prominent government posts, these are largely symbolic in a country dominated by informal access and decision-making.

While there is much debate over the narratives' validity, there can be no doubt that the two entities enjoyed different historical legacies and political systems. As such, while many Southern grievances – unemployment, poverty, absence of the rule of law, corruption and discrimination, among others – are present throughout Yemen, the lens through which Southerners interpret these injustices is unique. Given their historical experience, Southerners seem to expect more from the government in terms of jobs, education and the provision of law than do their Northern counterparts. Of equal significance, because the South used to be an independent state, opposition leaders there have a readily available framework to mobilise and inspire collective action.

By contrast, the same grievances in the North tend to inspire calls for reform or regime change. Minister of State Abd-al-Qader Hilal, a long-time decentralisation advocate, claims that feelings of marginalisation and discrimination are common throughout the country: "Even within a single governorate, one district will complain of marginalisation or discrimination when compared to another". However, he added, "in the South, this feeling of marginalisation has taken on a political dimension because of the absence of equal opportunities and because it used to be an independent state".³²

B. EMERGENCE OF THE HIRAAK

In late 2006, a group of army pensioners in Dalia governorate³³ began to organise protests and sit-ins demanding higher pensions and/or reinstatement to army service.³⁴ While they were motivated by specific grievances, the general environment in the South was ripe for unrest. In mid-2007, civil servants, teachers, lawyers, academics and unemployed youth from across the former PDRY's territories began to join the movement, which later became known as the Southern Movement (Al-Hiraak al-Janoubi).³⁵ Protesters framed their activities as a struggle against injustice, occupation and discrimination, and they insisted on "equal citizenship" and "equality under the law". Their demands focused on access to government jobs and benefits, but also included requests for greater local autonomy, enforcement of the rule of law, just distribution of land and more equitable resource sharing between the central government and localities, particularly regarding oil wealth. Initially, the Hiraak was a rights-

²⁸ See Floor Beuming, "The Merger of the Dagger and the Rifle", *op. cit.*, p. 89.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-90.

³¹ The issue of land rights is particularly complicated in the South, where properties have moved through stages of nationalisation and private ownership. Following unification, the government established land committees that returned some of the properties nationalised by the PDRY to original owners. However, most cases are marked by numerous claims to ownership, incomplete records and limited resources to compensate those whose valid claims to property cannot be met. Crisis Group interview, land owner from Lahi, Aden, November 2010. Moreover, there are claims of massive corruption in land distribution. A civil servant who worked in the housing ministry after unification confirmed that Southern grievances concerning land are justified and that the ministry released prime Southern lands to powerful military commanders and members of Saleh's family. For example, the Southern military commander (who is from the president's village) was allegedly given a piece of land roughly the size of Qatar. Crisis Group interview, civil servant, Sanaa, February 2011. For other examples of land grabs, see Paul Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

³² Crisis Group interview, Abd-al-Qader Hilal, Sanaa, 2 July 2011.

³³ The areas that currently compose Southern Dalia and the Lahj governorates provided the bulk of the PDRY's army. After the 1994 civil war, these areas suffered most from forced retirement. It therefore is not surprising that protests began in these areas. Even today, Southern Dalia and an area called Radfan in Lahj governorate are solidly separatist.

³⁴ By mid-2007, the army officers founded the "South Yemen Retired Army Officers Committee", which was led by retired Brigadier General Naser al-Nuba. Nuba is considered one of the Southern protest movement's founders, but his influence has lessened over time.

³⁵ Initially protests were quite small, usually several hundred people at most. However, they gained strength when security forces shot and killed four men in the Southern city of Habilayn, Lahj (in the area of Radfan), on the eve of celebrations marking the 44th anniversary of the beginning of the South's independence struggle against Britain in 1963. It was in the same city that the independence struggle took off when British soldiers shot and killed seven men on 14 October 1963. The symbolic impact of the Habilayn shooting on 13 October 2007 galvanised protests, and soon thousands joined the pensioners in a much broader movement.

based protest movement demanding reform in the context of unity. Demonstrations and sit-ins were overwhelming-ly peaceful, especially during the first year.

The regime responded to peaceful protests with a combination of targeted repression, limited concessions and attempted co-option. Unarmed protesters routinely faced harassment, unlawful arrest, rubber bullets and even live rounds.³⁶ In addition, the regime launched a campaign to muzzle the press and prevent images and information about the protests from spreading. In May 2009, for example, it temporarily suspended publication of eight independent newspapers, in addition to several popular blogs.³⁷ To this day, Aden's oldest and arguably most popular paper, *Al-Ayyam*, remains shuttered.

At the same time, the government responded positively to some grievances, while attempting to initiate a dialogue with the protesters. However, its concessions were inadequate, came too late and were never part of a strategic vision for sustained development in, and political inclusion of the South. For example, Yahya Shuaybi, the civil service minister, who is from the South, concedes that the government was too slow to act when the Southern military retirees began to ask for increased pay: "Eventually in 2007, the government took action to raise the retirees' pensions, but at that point it was no longer enough and the demands had increased. The issue became politicised".³⁸ A high-ranking military officer assessed the situation with the army pensioners in this way: "It is true that we did not handle the situation well. When the government tried to offer payment and jobs, they missed some people.

³⁶ Abuses by government security forces from the beginning of the movement through 2009 are documented by Human Rights Watch, "In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government's Brutal Responses to Southern Movement Protests", December 2009. One of the most notorious instances of abuse occurred in July 2010, when a young Aden resident, Ahmed Mohammad Darwish, died in prison one day after he was detained with dozens of others following a 19 June suspected al-Qaeda attack on the intelligence headquarters. "Two killed, two wounded in South Yemen 'day of rage'", Agence France-Presse, 7 July 2010. Darwish allegedly was tortured to death in prison. His killing sparked outrage in Aden, and he has since become a symbol of regime brutality. His pictures are posted throughout Aden and especially in his home district, Khormaksar.

³⁷ The papers were *Al-Mustaqilla*, *Al-Masdar*, *Al-Watani*, *Al-Diyar*, *Al-Ahali*, *Al-Nidaa*, *Al-Sharea* and *Al-Ayyam*. Sheila Carapico, "Kill the Messengers: Yemen's 2009 Clampdown on the Press", *Viewpoints*, The Middle East Institute, no. 11 (June 2009).

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Aden, 20 November 2010. Shuaybi said he is convinced that one of the most important catalysts for the protest movement was the 2005 civil service reform. It involved raising civil servant salaries in phases but applied only to active government employees. The government faced the technical problem of bringing pensioners back on the payroll to make them eligible for the raise and then retiring them again.

Also, giving these things encouraged more people to make demands".³⁹

Critics accuse the government of intentionally reinstating some and not others as part of a divide-and-rule tactic meant to fracture the opposition. Government officials counter by citing resource limitations for the uneven application of hiring, re-hiring and salary/pension raises.⁴⁰ Whatever the reason, the net effect of the government's interaction with retirees was to augment rather than assuage their demands.⁴¹

The government took other steps. It engaged in talks with the Hiraak, implemented and/or announced development initiatives and engaged in modest political reforms. From 2008 to 2010, a number of dialogue committees were tasked with negotiating with Hiraak leaders, many of whom received jobs and salaries in apparent payoff. But what dialogue took place ultimately proved unsuccessful. The Hiraak saw it as an attempt at co-option, not a genuine effort to address real or perceived economic and political marginalisation. Similarly, development initiatives were slow in coming and unconnected to any strategic vision, while failing to encourage Southern ownership of the process.⁴² The government responded to political demands for greater autonomy by allowing the election of governors in 2008. However, they were chosen by local councils

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, October 2010.

⁴⁰ The government re-hired military officers, raised their salaries, then retired them with a higher pension.

⁴¹ In other cases, the government promised jobs and then failed to deliver. A particularly inflammatory case occurred in March 2008, when the government invited hundreds of unemployed young men in the South to come to a recruitment conference in the Northern governorate of Dhamar. Instead of following through on job promises, the government sent the young men home empty-handed, after accusing them of lacking the "strength and loyalty necessary to serve in the Yemeni Armed Services". This incident resulted in serious rioting in both Lahj and Dalia provinces. See Stephen Day, "Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down the Regime?", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 62, no. 3 (Summer 2008), p. 429.

⁴² For example, in early 2010 the government announced a number of infrastructure projects that could create employment opportunities in the South. Then, in April 2010, President Saleh announced 163 projects worth approximately 32 billion riyals (approximately \$147 million) during a trip to Hadramawt governorate. See Nicole Stracke and Mohammed Saif Haidar, "The Southern Movement in Yemen", Gulf Research Centre, April 2010. In November 2010, Aden hosted the Gulf 20 regional football tournament. Prior to the event, the Yemeni government spent a great deal of money constructing new hotels and football stadiums and improving the city's public facilities. Yet, there was no plan to sustain tourism or investment in the city. Now the hotels are empty, the new stadium in Abyan destroyed by fighting between al-Qaeda affiliated militants and the government, and the majority of investments squandered.

dominated by the ruling party rather than elected directly.⁴³ Thus, like many other reform initiatives, the measure was belated and did little to meet demands for greater autonomy and accountability.

Partly in response to government repression and unwillingness or inability to address grievances, the Hiraak began to openly call for Southern independence by late 2008. The exact reasons behind this shift are debatable. An Abyan politician explained that it was primarily a consequence of regime neglect and violence: "The government initially did not hear the South's requests because they were made peacefully, and it countered the peaceful Hiraak with force, killing many. When someone from a family is killed, this family will join the separatist cause and maybe even turn to violence. The ensuing cycle has created a great deal of hatred in the South".⁴⁴ Others blame the former PDRY leadership. According to this reasoning, as economic problems grew in the South, especially among the young, former PDRY leaders abroad concluded the time was ripe to instigate unrest. Similarly, for some local leaders in Dalia and Lahj, separation would afford them a chance to rule once more.⁴⁵ Finally, many who affiliate with the Hiraak now claim that independence was their goal from the outset.⁴⁶

Whatever the cause, by 2009 the Hiraak was clearly a popular movement championing Southern independence, and it appeared to be gaining strength. In demonstrations, participants raised the PDRY flag and chanted slogans borrowed from the fight against the British: "*Barra, barra, ista'amaar*" (Out, out, occupation) and "*Thawra, thawra, yaa Janoub*" (Revolution, revolution, oh South). The shift to calls for independence prompted increased government repression; in turn, parts of the Hiraak in Dalia, Lahj and Abyan took up arms against the state. While the majority of Hiraak protests remained peaceful, and leaders continually emphasised peaceful tactics, they also warned of increased violence if their demands for independence were not met. According to a Hiraak leader from Aden, "they are still a peaceful movement for independence but the calls for violence grow every day. The leaders tell the people that this is not the way, but maybe people will choose violence without them".⁴⁷

As the Hiraak gained strength, the already weak central government authority in the South further receded.⁴⁸ A prominent Aden journalist estimated in November 2010 that the government controlled approximately 60 per cent of the city and as little as 10 per cent of the entire South. Notably, it had only limited control of Dalia, Lahj and Abyan, as well as certain Aden neighbourhoods like Al-Sa'adah.⁴⁹ While his assessment may be exaggerated, the government's control of Dalia was the most tenuous of all the governorates. Aden's deputy governor, Sultan Shuaybi, said in January 2010 that he had recently visited Dalia, where he claimed that the people complained: "There is no peace, no development and no government. The central government has abandoned us. The people in charge of the governorate are the YSP and the Hiraak".⁵⁰ A woman from Aden driving through Dalia confirmed that "once you are inside Dalia, you do not see the state police or the army. They are on the border, but not inside. Inside there is nothing, only angry people".⁵¹

From the beginning of the movement, Southern Dalia and an area called Radfan in the governorate of Lahj were the Hiraak's nerve centres. By 2010, these areas were almost completely controlled by Hiraak loyalists. A Hiraak leader in Aden proudly claimed that the government did not control the South outside of Aden. Instead, he said, the people were gaining control, and in these areas there was no longer any crime. The Yemeni flag, he boasted, no longer flew outside of Aden, having been banned by the Hiraak.⁵²

Over time, issues of cultural distinctiveness and identity came to play a more prominent role in the Hiraak's narrative. References to cultural differences between a presumably "tribal" North and purportedly "civilian" South are common (albeit misleading) in Yemeni political discourse. Hiraak supporters see these differences as particularly intractable and invoke them to justify the need for separation. Some Hiraak followers go so far as to argue that Southerners are not Yemeni but "South Arabian". There are a number of variations on this claim, but the basic idea is that "Yemen" is not the name of a people or nation but rather a geographic distinction that historically includes the entire Arabian Peninsula south of the *kabba* in Mecca,

⁴³ The GPC won a landslide victory in the 2006 local council elections, including in the South.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, prominent leader from Abyan, Sanaa, November 2010.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, civil servant, Aden, November 2010.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, two Hiraak members, Sanaa, November 2010; members of Hiraak's National Council, Aden, November 2010.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Aden, November 2010.

⁴⁸ While the government's control of its territory has never been absolute, it historically has been stronger in "middle Yemen" – Taiz, Ibb and Hodeidah – and the former PDRY territories than in the northern highlands. Before the Hiraak's emergence, the government was clearly in control of administration and security in most regions of the South, with a few notable exceptions like Shebwa governorate.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Aden, November 2010.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sultan Shuaybi, Deputy Governor of Aden, Aden, 23 January 2011.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, female civil servant, Aden, November 2010.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Hiraak leader, Aden, November 2010.

Saudi Arabia. As such, “Yemen” is said to include parts of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman; the people of these countries do not consider themselves “Yemeni”, so neither should the people of “South Arabia”.

Proponents of this view correctly point out that the area now identified as Yemen never existed as a unified national unit but was occupied by various groups, such as the Ottomans, Zaydi imams and the British. They go further to make the historically dubious claim that, the term “Yemen” was not applied to Southern Arabia until the socialists changed the name of the British-ruled “Federation of South Arabia” to “South Yemen”.⁵³ A Hiraak supporter said, “the socialists imposed a new identity on the Southerners after independence from the British and then, in 1990, they entered into unity with the North”.⁵⁴ The applicability of the name “Yemen” to the former PDRY’s territory is actively debated within the Hiraak; what is new is the revival of the name “South Arabia” in public discourse and debate. This is hardening feelings of Southern distinctiveness and potentially rendering the current conflict more intractable.

Immediately prior to the start of the Arab Spring in January 2011, the Hiraak’s influence and popularity in the South was on the rise. Heavy-handed regime tactics against peaceful protesters galvanised hatred of the Northern “occupiers” and buttressed support for separation. Moreover, the government’s unwillingness to openly admit to and seriously address a distinctively “Southern issue” only strengthened the hand of those seeking immediate separation, or what Hiraak members call disengagement,⁵⁵ and undermined the position of those who supported a compromise solution through dialogue and reform. A prominent Hiraak and YSP member explained: “Southern leaders cannot address the problems on the street until Sanaa is willing to recognise that there is a Southern problem. If they try to calm the people in the South without showing that Sanaa has recognised a problem, people will see Southern leaders as regime stooges”.⁵⁶

In other words, despite various levels of commitment to independence within the Hiraak, Sanaa’s response to protests has pushed many into the pro-secessionist camp. By the end of 2010, calls for independence – not reform or regime change – were on the rise and appeared to com-

mand the majority in much of the South, especially outside of Aden.⁵⁷

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, group of Hiraak supporters, Aden, November 2010; and two Hiraak supporters, Sanaa, November 2010.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Hiraak supporter and YSP member, Sanaa, November 2010.

⁵⁵ Hiraak members do not use the term separation, insisting instead on the term disengagement. For them, the former term implies existing unity, which they reject.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Hiraak supporter and YSP member, Sanaa, November 2010.

⁵⁷ The special case of Aden is addressed below.

IV. THE "YEMENI SPRING" AND THE QUESTION OF THE SOUTH

A. THE 2011 UPRISING

In many ways, Yemen was ahead of the regional curve with regard to peaceful protests. The Hiraak began as a rights-based movement for reform in late 2006, long before the Arab Spring. Still, the regional focus of the grievances and the shift to calls for independence severely curtailed its ability to garner national support. The 2011 uprising offered a new opportunity for broader collective action. In January, a small group of youth and civil society activists, primarily from Sanaa and Taiz, began a protest movement whose goal was to build a more accountable, capable and inclusive democratic state.⁵⁸ With the fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak in February, protests gained momentum; by March they were joined by the formal opposition bloc, the Joint Meeting Parties,⁵⁹ as well as a number of military and political defectors.

Mass regime defections were triggered by the now notorious events of 18 March, when Saleh loyalists located on rooftops shot and killed over 50 unarmed demonstrators in Sanaa. At that point, Saleh's fellow tribesman and long-time ally, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, switched sides, declaring his support for the protest movement and dividing the country's military forces into pro- and anti-government camps. Similarly, the pre-eminent sheikh of Saleh's own tribal confederation, Sadeq al-Ahmar (no relation to Ali Mohsen), threw his weight behind the opposition, as did a number of other prominent ruling party politicians.⁶⁰

The wave of defections did not lead to regime change. Instead the country entered into a period of political and military stalemate, punctuated by bouts of violence.⁶¹ The

increasingly prominent role played by existing political parties, particularly Islah, and former regime insiders complicated the uprising and frustrated many original protesters, who view them as latecomers to the uprising and part of the status quo they wish to change. Moreover, flashes of violent conflict between regime loyalists, on one hand, and Ali Mohsen's forces, Islah militias and tribesmen loyal to Sadeq al-Ahmar, on the other, at times have overshadowed the overwhelmingly peaceful protests that continue throughout the country.

While February and March were high points for the uprising, offering new opportunities for cooperation across regional, sectarian and political divides, ten gruelling months of protest, combined with intra-elite conflict, have dampened momentum and undermined prospects for a much needed political transition.⁶² Despite ongoing diplomatic efforts by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), U.S., UK, EU and UN to broker a peaceful transition, elite hardliners in both camps have not relinquished the military option and seem determined to vanquish the other side.

For their part, protesters have long rejected the transitional compromise proposed by the international community that would grant Saleh and his family immunity in return for relinquishing power to an opposition-led coalition government. Instead, they publicly insist on the president's immediate resignation and prosecution. That said, many independent youth protesters claim they would now accept the transition agreement and that it is in fact the JMP that is pushing protesters to reject compromise in order to strengthen the opposition parties' bargaining position.⁶³ As the impasse continues, economic and humanitarian conditions are worsening, and more areas of the country are falling outside of the government's already weak control.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ For an analysis of the causes and early dynamics of the uprising, see Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°102, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (II): Yemen Between Reform and Revolution*, 10 March 2011.

⁵⁹ The JMP is a coalition of five opposition parties: Islah, the YSP, the Nasirist Popular Unionist Party, al-Haqq (the Party of Truth) and the Union of Popular Forces (UPF). The latter three have little to no popular base. Al-Haqq and the UPF are small Zaydi parties.

⁶⁰ For an analysis of how the 18 March event changed the uprising's dynamics, see Crisis Group Conflict Risk Alert, "Yemen", 23 March 2011.

⁶¹ The most prominent instances of violence since 18 March include clashes between military/security forces loyal to Saleh and tribesmen loyal to Sadeq al-Ahmar on 23 May, during which over 150 were killed and which was ended by a tenuous Saudi-brokered ceasefire; a government crackdown on protesters in the city of Taiz on 29 and 30 May, in which more than 50 were killed and hundreds injured, following which anti-government tribesmen took up arms to defend protesters; the bombing of a

mosque inside the presidential palace on 3 June that severely injured Saleh and several high-ranking government officials, one of whom – the speaker of the Shura Council – died from his injuries, while Saleh spent three months in Saudi Arabia convalescing before returning to Yemen on 23 September; an attack by regime loyalists and security forces on unarmed demonstrators in Sanaa on 18 September, during which 26 were killed and that led to the first direct clashes in the capital between troops loyal to Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and those loyal to Saleh. In addition, the government has engaged in sporadic clashes with pro-opposition tribesmen in Arhab and Nihm, two areas north of the capital that are strategic gateways to the city.

⁶² For an analysis of how elite rivalries between the Salehs and the family of Sadeq al-Ahmar are undermining peaceful transition, see Crisis Group Conflict Risk Alert, "Yemen", 27 May 2011.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, three youth activists and organisers, October 2011.

⁶⁴ In early October 2011, a UN media report said that the combination of the regime's violent response to demonstrations, the fuel crisis and rising food prices had "turned chronic problems like malnutrition into acute crisis. Yet as an already fragile hu-

The uprising has had a complex impact on the Hiraak movement and the Southern question more broadly. On one level, it potentially offers new avenues for peaceful resolution of the Southern issue. Yet it also has raised the stakes, heightening the threat of separation in the case of inaction. The outcome of the national political-military crisis is certain to shape the South's fate, just as the Southern movement's position toward events in the North will affect the uprising's outcome.

B. HIRAAK'S FALTERING SUPPORT FOR THE UPRISING

Initially the uprising facilitated new cooperation and coordination between protesters in the North and South. Hiraak members, especially in Aden and the Hadramawt port city of Mukalla, agreed to work with anti-regime protesters in the North to precipitate the regime's collapse. They agreed that calling for Southern independence would undermine the immediate goal of regime change by fracturing opposition voices and undermining the youth revolution's momentum. In February and March, protesters in Aden and Mukalla agreed to raise neither the Southern nor the Yemeni flag during demonstrations. They also agreed not to chant anti-unity slogans but "*Irhal*" (leave!) and similar popular catchwords of the revolution.⁶⁵ During this time, Hiraak members and youth protest leaders in Sanaa and Taiz engaged in a flurry of communication, coordination and cooperation.⁶⁶ Moreover, independents and opposition party members in the South unaffiliated with the Hiraak began to organise and joined anti-regime protests.

That said, the level of cooperation varied. Some Hiraak individuals and groups never lowered the Southern flag or ceased calling for independence. Moreover, while coordination developed in Aden and Mukalla, in other parts of the South, particularly in Dalia and Radfan, the Hiraak maintained its calls for separation.⁶⁷ For those who did coordinate, the decision was largely tactical. Their goal

remained resolution of the Southern issue through separation or, at a minimum, greater autonomy. A young Hiraak supporter from Aden's Mansoura district said, "after the fall of the regime, we will continue to protest and seek a solution to the Southern problem. Our issue is one of land and people".⁶⁸ Expressing a similar sentiment, a YSP member of the Hiraak warned that the uprising had produced a fragile unity: "The Southerners started their protests with a request for liberation, not the fall of the regime. They want independence, not reform".⁶⁹

In early to mid-April, cooperation between anti-regime protest movement leaders and the Hiraak began to sour. Protesters in Aden offered several explanations. Some claim that Islah began to dominate the protest venues and antagonised independents and protesters who sympathised with the Hiraak.⁷⁰ A group of protesters in Aden recounted how Islah party members opposed independent youth action initiatives designed to organise civil disobedience campaigns in the city. As happened in the North, disagreements developed between independents and Islah supporters concerning negotiations with the regime over a transition of power. Opposition parties, including Islah, supported them, while independents demanded Saleh's immediate resignation. Tensions in Aden escalated on 9 April, when Islah supporters allegedly attacked and destroyed independent protesters' tents in Crater district's protest square. According to a young man present in the square at the time, Islah supporters beat independent youths and took over the area. After this, he and his colleagues joined the Hiraak.⁷¹

Protesters in the South likewise were disillusioned by opposition parties' public statements and actions in Sanaa. For example, they were offended by the failure of activists in the capital's Change Square to include Hiraak members when they read out the names of those killed in peaceful protests. By the same token, they resented opposition leader Hamid al-Ahmar's⁷² comment that the Southern issue could be resolved in three years by ensuring both that the

manitarian situation gets worse, hesitant donors, insecurity and logistical complexities are hampering the delivery of aid to the most vulnerable", www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reortid=93883.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak youth leader, Sanaa, April 2011; five independent Hiraak supporters, Aden, April 2011; prominent independent journalist, Aden, April 2011; Hiraak youth leader, Aden, April 2011; and Hiraak youth group leader in Aden, Aden, 28 June 2011.

⁶⁶ Cooperation was verified in numerous Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak members in Aden and protest movement leaders (both youth leaders and JMP opposition leaders) in Sanaa, February and March 2011.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, five independent Hiraak supporters, Aden, April 2011; and a group of independent journalists, qat chew, Aden, April 2011.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Aden, April 2011.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, YSP supporters of the Hiraak, Aden, April 2011.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, independent Adeni journalist, Aden, June 2011.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, young protester from Crater, Aden, April 2011.

⁷² Hamid al-Ahmar is the son of Islah's founder, the preeminent sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation, the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar. Hamid is a member of Islah's shura (consultative) council and a wealthy business tycoon. He is an outspoken opponent of the Saleh regime, although he and his family are long-time regime insiders. In 2011 he emerged as an active financier of the uprising.

next president is from the South and that Southerners are guaranteed greater parliamentary representation.⁷³

Finally, and possibly most importantly, protesters in the North and South failed to reach agreement on how to prioritise the Southern issue in a post-regime transitional period. During meetings between youth representatives in Sanaa, Southerners asked their Northern colleagues what would happen after Saleh was gone. They demanded written guarantees that the Southern issue would be prioritised above all other matters; some wanted assurances of a separate dialogue between North and South, as opposed to dealing with the Southern issue in the context of national dialogue bringing together stakeholders from across the political and regional spectrum. Ultimately, according to Southern youth, Northern protest leaders proved hesitant to engage in specifics or make written promises.⁷⁴ Likewise, they refused to form a youth council with equal participation of North and South.⁷⁵

Some Northern activists argued they had moved to accommodate Southern aspirations; one, who was involved in the negotiations, said that the Northern protesters had made clear, written commitments to focus on the Southern issue.

Ultimately, the chief obstacle to cooperation lay in the fact that, by April, Southerners feared the revolution would fail and that it had been compromised by opposition parties and regime insiders such as Ali Mohsen. Northern youth also refused to give priority to the Southern issue above other pressing matters such as the Huthi conflict or to promise Southern activists an eventual referendum on unity.⁷⁶

As it were, after his encounter with Northern protest leaders, a Southern representative remarked: "Youth in the North have the same mentality as the rulers. After the meeting, the Southern youth decided to go their separate way".⁷⁷ Another Southern activist living in Sanaa summarised the change as follows:

Before the revolution, the Hiraak was the most active in the street, while the [opposition coalition] JMP was weak. Then the revolution came and the independent youth became active. The JMP supported the revolution, and the Hiraak followed suit. But after three to four weeks – sometime in March – a fight erupted over the Southern flag. This led to an agreement that the

Hiraak would not use it in demonstrations. Soon, however, Islah began to raise the unity flag, which angered the Hiraak. This had a negative effect on the street in Aden. Then Islah began to say that there is no Southern issue. This raised fears in the South, and now the Hiraak is once again raising the Southern flag in demonstrations. It was the JMP's mistake, not Hiraak's. Now there is agreement in the South that the regime needs to go, but not on the solution to the Southern problem. There is a great deal of sensitivity in the South that Northerners do not understand the Southern issue.⁷⁸

Distrust and differences grew over time, and by late April the initial euphoria over coordination with the North had faded. Protesters throughout the South once again vocally called for separation. By late June, the Southern flag was ubiquitous in most areas of Aden, especially in the districts of Crater, Khormaksar and Mansoura. In these areas, bus stops used as protest stages and gathering places were decorated with the Southern flag and independence slogans. By June, the Hiraak had reasserted its principal role in mobilising the street. While most of its supporters still publicly called for the regime's downfall, they made clear that regime change alone would not solve the Southern issue.⁷⁹ Some still believe that Saleh's demise would be a step in the right direction, opening the door to dialogue with the North on the terms of unity. But others are persuaded that the uprising is a purely Northern matter, whose success or failure will have no impact on their goal of separation.⁸⁰

C. THE ELUSIVE SEARCH FOR A UNIFIED SOUTHERN VOICE

For years, Southerners who live in the South and abroad have been far more vocal than Southerners who reside in the North, notably in Sanaa. As explained by a prominent political analyst, this reflects the fact that the former have enjoyed relatively broad political space in which to express their views; by contrast, most Southerners in Sanaa are government employees and thus face more significant constraints.⁸¹ The uprising provided an opportunity to change that. In many ways, anti-regime protests have broken down a barrier of fear, expanding the acceptable range of debate. In this new atmosphere, Southern resi-

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, three Hiraak supporters, Aden, April 2011; and prominent Adeni journalist, Aden, June 2011. For Southern commentary on Hamid's statement, see "Hamid al-Ahmar Speaks on Southern Issue", *National Yemen*, 16 April 2011.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Adeni Hiraak leader, Aden, April 2011.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Adeni Hiraak leader, Sanaa, April 2011.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, youth activist, Sanaa, October 2011.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, June 2011.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, three Hiraak members, qat chew, Sanaa, April 2011; approximately 25 Hiraak members or sympathisers, qat chew, Aden, April 2011; and approximately 30 Hiraak members or sympathisers, qat chew, Aden, June 2011.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Hiraak leader in Aden, Aden, April 2011.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Southern political analyst living in Sanaa, Sanaa, July 2011.

dents of the North began to meet, organise and participate in a larger discussion on the South's political future.

In a meeting held on 11 April 2011, Southerners in Sanaa from across the political spectrum formed a group called "Sons of the Southern Provinces in Sanaa". Its aim was modest: to provide an unofficial forum that could bring Southerners together and raise awareness regarding the Southern issue. More specifically, its organisers explained that the time had come to raise the profile of the Southern issue and launch a policy debate on appropriate solutions in order to influence future constitutional reforms. According to participants, the meeting was the first of its kind since 1990 in which all groups of Southerners – from different regions and different political perspectives – came together in a single gathering. In the past, they had discussed politics in separate informal gatherings, such as qat chews,⁸² which typically were based on party or regional affiliations. Moreover, President Saleh always made sure to deal with them separately rather than as a single Southern bloc.⁸³

To the surprise of its organisers, approximately 600 people attended the Sons' April meeting in Sanaa. At its conclusion, they released a draft statement supporting resolution of the Southern issue "in a way both just and satisfying for Southerners". Among other things, they announced their support for peaceful demonstrations and sit-ins, condemned regime violence and emphasised the positive and peaceful role the Hiraak had played in the struggle against injustice. They insisted that any new political arrangement would have to take into consideration the Southern issue. More specifically, they said:

Any forthcoming political arrangement regarding Yemen's political system must guarantee a principal and effective role for Southern participation, including consideration of land area, wealth and the large coastline. It must also include the creation of a broad partnership within civil, security and military institutions, as well as participation of the Sons of the Southern Provinces in the administration of their local affairs, in addition to their participation in central state institutions. These previously mentioned considerations must be present in a new social contract governing Yemen's future.⁸⁴

The statement was bold in its assertion that the Southern issue, and particularly the principle of participation and partnership, must be addressed in any new political arrangement. Moreover, it was explicit in its support for what it termed the youth revolution and respect for the Hiraak's peaceful activism. That said, the statement lacked specificity regarding policy options, a reflection of the group's diversity. Participants explained that while some were eager to identify the regime as the source of the South's problems, others preferred to recognise the importance of the Southern issue without directly criticising the regime. In like manner, a majority backed separation while others advocated full partnership between North and South within the context of unity. The notion of federalism as a compromise generally was well-received, but in the end the group chose not to commit to a single policy option; instead, it came out in support of a vaguer, more ambiguous notion – "what the Southern people want".⁸⁵

The Sons' emergence reflects the opening of the political space, itself a product of the 2011 uprising. In the past, Southerners both inside and outside the country had sought to harmonise their demands, but now they comprised a wider spectrum and began coordinating their activities at an accelerated pace. In this sense, the Sons are just one of many interconnected forums attempting to corral and clarify a Southern perspective; two recent meetings outside of Yemen form part of the same phenomenon. The first, held in Cairo in May, was closely linked to the Sanaa meetings in terms of ideas and participation. It brought together more than 200 leaders, activists and intellectuals, including 100 residing in Yemen. The meeting was led by Ali Naser Muhammad and Haydar al-Attas, two of the South's most prominent exiled leaders.⁸⁶

In contrast to the Sanaa gathering, the Cairo meeting took a clear stand on the ultimate political outcome. It produced a document called "A Southern vision for a comprehensive solution to the current crisis in Yemen" that proposed a federal state with a Northern and a Southern region. Each region would have the right to form an independent parliament and exercise absolute authority over its natural resources and wealth, while supporting the federal budget according to a pre-agreed ratio. The document's starting assumption was that the current union is null and void, and continued unity should be a choice between two sov-

⁸² Qat is a mildly narcotic leaf generally chewed by Yemenis in a social setting. The Qat chew is a central part of the country's social and political life. Chews are generally held immediately after lunch in homes, offices or even the streets. They offer a venue for exchanging ideas, venting grievances and socialising.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, member of the "Sons of the Southern Provinces in Sanaa", Sanaa, July 2011.

⁸⁴ "Bayaan Sadr aan al-Liqaa al-Mowsa li Abnaa al-Muhafizat al-Janoubiya bi-Sanaa" ["Announcement issued during a broad based meeting of the Sons of the Southern Provinces in Sanaa"],

11 April 2011, copy acquired from a Sons' member, Sanaa, June 2011.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, members of the "Sons of the Southern Provinces in Sanaa", Sanaa, July 2011. Since the initial meeting, the group met again on 28 April, this time gathering over 1,000 participants and electing a coordination council to connect with Southerners and raise awareness of the Southern issue.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, meeting attendee, Sanaa, June 2011.

foreign nations.⁸⁷ While the statement clearly supported the youth revolution's main demand – the regime's downfall – it argued that solving the nation's underlying crises would come about only through prioritising the Southern issue and re-formulating unity via a new constitution based on federal principles.⁸⁸

The Cairo meeting was the first of its kind to be held outside the country; many interpreted its support of federalism as a compromise between a unitary system and immediate separation. The proposal appears to have gained traction since then and enjoys the support of the South's exiled leadership, parts of the Hiraak and even Southern government employees living in Sanaa.⁸⁹

Southern exiles supporting immediate independence held a separate meeting in Brussels at the end of July, chaired by former South Yemen President Ali Salim al-Beedh. In line with his previous statements, the conference rejected what it termed the North's occupation of the South and "affirmed the people's absolute right to free themselves of occupation and achieve their complete and unrestricted independence in accordance with their collective will, and without outside interference". In an effort to strike an inclusive chord, the document continually emphasised dialogue and tolerance among Southerners. Yet, the inclusion it advocated was limited to those Southerners who share the common goal of independence. Like its Sanaa and Cairo predecessors, this meeting sought to coordinate Southern activism. It proposed a "Higher Preparatory Council" to pave the way for a national meeting on the Southern issue to be held at an unspecified future date. Moreover, it emphasised the need for communication between those struggling for independence inside Yemen and Preparatory Council leaders abroad.⁹⁰

Efforts to unify the Southern voice continue. Another Cairo conference was held on 26 and 27 September in order to lay the groundwork for a future large-scale meeting on the

Southern position. Conference participants, including Ali Naser Mohammad and Haydar al-Attas, issued a concluding statement confirming their support for the fall of the regime and their commitment to including the Southern issue in all political negotiations.⁹¹ That said, al-Beedh refused to attend and proponents of immediate independence were critical of the meeting, expressing frustration with leaders like Ali Naser and Attas for their willingness to accept a federal option and to work with the JMP opposition.⁹²

D. TWO TRACKS: SEPARATION AND FEDERALISM

As seen, political activism in the South has begun to focus on two possible ways forward: immediate separation or a federation consisting of two regions. This first option, backed by Ali Salim al-Beedh, enjoys strong appeal among several Hiraak groups. Inside Yemen, it resonates most powerfully in Dalia and Lahj governorates, the two areas that lost power after the 1994 civil war and have constituted the Southern movement's core support base since its inception.

At the same time, the federal option – which, prior to the uprising, found support among only a few Southern intellectuals, had little appeal among Hiraak members and virtually none in the North – has been gaining backing from among a broad range of Southerners. These include part of the Hiraak, as well as influential exiled leaders Ali Naser Muhammad and Haydar al-Attas. In this sense, one of the uprising's significant consequences has been to put federalism on the bargaining table as a serious and viable way forward. Abdulghani al-Iryani, a prominent independent analyst, said:

The Southern issue has gone through a metamorphosis. At first people were calling for independence but they knew this was an unrealistic goal. They were doing this out of desperation and as part of a bargaining strategy to draw attention to the Southern cause. Now things are changing and the possibility of independence is there. This is making people rethink their options. Some say that if they could get a good enough bargain through unity – such as federalism – this would be enough.⁹³

Whether a federal option will be acceptable to a majority of Southerners, or indeed a majority of Yemenis, remains to be seen.

⁸⁷ The group uses the term "federal state" in its proposal but appears to mean something closer to a confederation. There is a pressing need to clarify terms and specific decentralisation options.

⁸⁸ "Ruuya Janoubia li Hal Shamil lil Azma al-Rahina fi al-Yemen" ["A Southern vision for a comprehensive solution to the current crisis in Yemen"], May 2011, copy acquired in Sanaa, June 2011.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Ali Naser Muhammad, and Haydar al-Attas, Cairo, 17 July 2011; Hiraak youth leader, Aden, June 2011; approximately twenty Hiraak members, qat chew, Aden, June 2011; and members of the Sons of the Southern Provinces, qat chew, Sanaa, June 2011.

⁹⁰ "Al-Bayaan al-Khaami al-Sadr aan al-Liqaa al-Shaawari lil Abnaa al-Janoub fi Bruksal" ["Concluding statement issued during the consultative meeting of Southerners in Brussels"], 26 June 2011, copy acquired in Sanaa, June 2011.

⁹¹ Mohammad bin Sallam, "Southern Movement divided over future role", *Yemen Times*, 5 October 2011.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Ahmed Muthana, chairman of Democratic Forum for South Yemen in the U.S. (TAJ), a group advocating Southern independence, October 2011.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 21 June 2011.

A third option, to organise the country along four or five federal regions, has found wider appeal in the North and potentially could gain traction within the staunchly pro-unity parties, both the opposition *Islah* and ruling GPC.⁹⁴

V. PRINCIPAL ACTORS

Given the profound flux in the political system, it is especially challenging to classify groups of stakeholders. The categories listed below are only one way of doing so, and they may change depending on the course of the political process.⁹⁵ While there is tremendous diversity within each category, each group has an identifiable public policy position on the South and an important role to play in the Southern issue's resolution.

A. THE RULING GENERAL PEOPLE'S CONGRESS

The General People's Congress (GPC) is a broadly inclusive umbrella group that more resembles a patronage distribution mechanism than a political party with a clear ideology and platform. Most senior government officials are also GPC members, as this combines the opportunity to extend patronage and express loyalty to the regime. Although the GPC accommodates multiple perspectives on the Southern issue, members virtually unanimously evince a pro-unity stance. For the overwhelming majority, it is a red line, a sacred accomplishment that cannot be questioned. Even the Southern members overwhelmingly are supportive of reforms within the context of unity. At the risk of oversimplification, Southerners allied with the regime hail mostly from Abyan, Hadramawt and Shebwa and are part of Ali Nasser's group, the *Zumra*.⁹⁶ They arguably have benefited more from unity than their rivals, the *Tughma*, from Dalia and Lahj. Although historical divisions do not always explain current political positions, they tend to be seen by Yemenis as the reason why pro-GPC Southerners favour unity, while their historical opponents press for separation.

⁹⁵ If there is a political transition, the future of the GPC and the JMP would be uncertain, as both groups could fracture and realign into different political groupings as a result of the uprising. In the case of the GPC, this already has begun. Defectors include both genuine reformers ideologically attracted to the uprising and its objectives and/or supporters of either General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar or the family of the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar. The JMP could fracture if there is a shift to a parliamentary system, as it arose largely as a result of the first-past-the-post electoral system, which tends to favour two-party political systems, and of the need to form a coalition against a common enemy, the regime.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Sanaa, July 2011. Since the late 1990s, the *Zumra* also has been gradually excluded from power, as Saleh has sought to balance various Southern factions off against one another. Still, many members of this group remain closely aligned with the regime, and Southerners continue to frame current divisions within the South in terms of these two groupings.

⁹⁴ Federal options and independence are discussed in greater detail below.

Beneath the surface, however, unanimity breaks down into a broad range of opinions, from denying there is a specific Southern problem to acknowledging it and seeking resolution through devolution of power. Generally, GPC Northerners are more likely to deny the Southern issue's legitimacy and to emphasise economic hardship as the sole driver of conflict. A minority are even convinced, or at least argue, that the solution lies in greater centralisation. Thus, a high-ranking military official said he felt that Yemen had moved too quickly to implement local rule; in his view, reinforcing local identities through devolution of authority hinders efforts to build strong and effective central government institutions.⁹⁷ Other GPC members from North and South recognise the unique challenges faced by the South and tend to advocate giving wider authorities to local governments to manage their administrative and financial affairs. Still others are supportive, or at least open to discussing, federal options.⁹⁸

Officially, the GPC supports substantive political and economic decentralisation. In January 2011, after much lobbying by decentralisation proponents, it submitted a set of constitutional amendments to parliament, including one that would have allowed greater local government powers. However, the party subsequently withdrew its unilaterally submitted amendments, which included a provision that would have allowed Saleh to stand again for president, at the JMP's request. In addition, prior to the uprising a GPC committee conducted a study led by a prominent Adeni, Abdullah Ghanem, to develop a strategy for addressing the Southern issue.

The ensuing plan called for, among other things, greater decentralisation, local elections, land reform, equal representation for each governorate in the upper house of parliament, proportional voting, and local control over resources. As part of an immediate effort to address problems in the South, several ministries were scheduled to move from Sanaa to Aden, including those for fishing, trade, transportation and tourism. While this was the government's strategy before the uprising, the current situation has made implementation impossible; still, GPC officials argue that the plan should be one option on the table for solving the Southern issue at a future national dialogue.⁹⁹

Prior to the uprising, the GPC could have pushed through a package of economic and political reforms that might have eased tensions in the South and, at a minimum, opened political space for more thoroughly addressing the root causes of conflict. In the existing environment, however, its capacity to act unilaterally is limited, while its ability to improve the situation in the South largely will depend on the outcome of the political transition in Sanaa. Its popular appeal has weakened over time, eroding its influence regardless of how the process unfolds. Still, the GPC includes leaders from critical Southern constituencies whose support would be essential for any peaceful long-term resolution of the Southern question.

Nor ought one ignore the genuine financial constraints the current or any subsequent government will face in seeking to deal with this issue. The shortage of resources necessary to adequately address Southerners' demands for jobs and services is typically dismissed by the opposition as a pretext, yet it is a reality, especially regarding the civil service, which is bloated, full of redundancy and ghost workers, and in desperate need of streamlining. According to Yahya Shuaybi, the civil service minister, "the government needs to cut the civil service by approximately 50 per cent. In this situation, there is no way it can open up its payrolls to solve the situation in the South".¹⁰⁰ Instead, employment will have to be part of broader and more difficult reform package that encourages private sector investment, economic diversification and access to Gulf labour markets.

B. THE OPPOSITION JOINT MEETING PARTIES

Formed in 2002 in an attempt to challenge the GPC, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) is an alliance of five diverse opposition groups, including the Islamist party, Islah and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP).¹⁰¹ Officially, it supports unity and the resolution of the Southern issue in the context of an inclusive national dialogue. Since preparations for dialogue began in 2009, JMP leaders repeatedly have stressed the need to resolve the Southern issue. In 2010, they enunciated a "Vision for National Salvation", a package of wide-ranging political and institutional reforms that followed extensive consultations with various opposition groups, including parts of the Hiraak and the Southern leadership in exile.¹⁰² The document called for

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, October 2010.

⁹⁸ Several Southerners within the party hold this view without trumpeting it. Moreover, a number of GPC members who defected after the killing of over 50 young people in Sanaa's Change Square in March 2011 now support a federal state – or are at least talking about it with the Southern opposition abroad. Crisis Group interviews, former and current GPC members, June, July and October 2011.

⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Abd-al-Qader Hilal, Sanaa, 2 July 2011.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Aden, 20 November 2010.

¹⁰¹ Islah, the only party with a significant grassroots base and financial backing, is the coalition's strongest member.

¹⁰² The document was prepared by the JMP's Preparatory Council for National Dialogue (PCND), established in 2010 to pave the way for talks with the GPC. When plans for a dialogue stalled in early 2011, the PCND continued its preparatory activities and even now continues to meet and assist in coordination with various opposition groups. It has a number of sub-com-

an immediate national settlement to address the Southern issue and restoration of North-South partnership. It took a strong stance in favour of decentralisation, while proposing that specific options – local government as specified in the current constitution, federation or local government with greater authorities – be determined through dialogue. It also called for a two-chamber parliament with equal representation from each region in the upper house.¹⁰³

Since the uprising, efforts to coordinate with the Hiraak and leadership in exile have continued, although thus far the JMP has failed to secure their participation in the opposition-led National Revolution Council, whose goal is to unify opposition efforts to topple the regime.¹⁰⁴ That said, JMP members differ significantly in their understanding of and approach to the Southern issue. In particular, there is a wide gap between the coalition's two most powerful political members, Islah and the YSP.

1. Islah

Islah is the strongest of the opposition parties. It has broad national appeal and enjoys substantial financial backing from prominent entrepreneurs, such as Hamid al-Ahmar. In many ways, Islah's position on the Southern issue is similar to the GPC's. Both parties are staunchly pro-unity, evince zero tolerance for discussing separation and only slightly more for the federal option. Islah possesses strong internal discipline, and even Southern members revert to the party line when discussing the Southern issue. Like their GPC counterparts, Islahis de-emphasise identity-based issues in the South, preferring to stress the need for national-level political reforms. Islah's parliament member representing Crater district, Insof Mayo, said:

The people of the North and the South are looking for the same things: stability and a civil state that protects their rights. Few Southerners genuinely want independence, but all of them want stability, freedom and a civil

mittees, one of which is tasked with reaching out to Southerners inside the country and another with communicating with the external Southern leadership. Crisis Group interview, Mohammad Abd-al-Malik al-Mutawakkil, Secretary General, Union of Popular Forces, 28 July 2011.

¹⁰³ For a copy of the "Vision for National Salvation" and information on the Preparatory Committee for National Dialogue, see <http://yemenvision.worldpress.com>.

¹⁰⁴ On 17 August, JMP leaders announced a 143-member National Council to topple the regime and prepare for a transition. Days after the announcement, however, 23 Southern leaders, including Ali Naser and Haydar al-Attas, left the council because their request for 50 per cent representation for the South had not been met. They also claimed that their viewpoints were not adequately represented. Crisis Group e-mail communication, Southern activist who resigned from the council, Aden, 5 September 2011.

state. The solution to the Southern problems can be addressed through Islah's [and the JMP's] program for comprehensive political reform. It is based on the challenges facing the South but applies to the entire country.¹⁰⁵

Despite support for Islah in the South, its history there is a significant liability that limits its popular appeal and influence. Immediately after the 1994 war, militants associated with Islah took part in the sacking of Aden and the desecration of Sufi shrines in Hadramawt. Moreover, as part of its efforts to marginalise the YSP, the GPC encouraged Islah (its ruling partner until 1997) to extend its influence in Aden, a move that sparked resentment among native Adenis who felt that the party's conservative version of Islam was out of step with the culture of their historically open city.¹⁰⁶ Besides opposing its conservative social perspectives, many Southerners view Islah as a "Northern party" closely associated with the Ahmars (both the family of Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar)¹⁰⁷ and, as such, hardly different from the regime in perspective and *modus operandi*. A Hiraak youth leader in Aden noted that:

Southerners have a bad history and experience with Islah. Now the Northern opposition leaders, like Ali Mohsen, Hamid al-Ahmar, Abdulwahab al-Anisi and Muhammad al-Yadoumi [the latter three all Islah leaders] are all the same as the Saleh group, because they are just as corrupt and have the same mentality. Our [the Hiraak's] main concern is that the current revolution will turn into a crisis between the GPC and the JMP, which will return Yemen to the same post-1994 power structure – GPC and Islah domination".¹⁰⁸

Other Hiraak members expressed similar scepticism toward Islah, while distinguishing somewhat between its Northern and Southern members. According to one activist, "Islah has a bad history in the South, particularly given the fatwas issued by its religious scholars during and after the civil war justifying attacks against socialist 'infidels'. Yet there are two parts of Islah, and sometimes the local Islah will disagree behind the scenes with their headquarters because they support the Southern cause".¹⁰⁹

In the past Islah has been a significant obstacle to decentralisation. Most notably, the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, Islah's founder, was a vocal opponent;

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Aden, 24 November 2010.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, two Adeni women, Aden, April 2011.

¹⁰⁷ While Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar is not a member of Islah, for decades he has been an important liaison between the Saleh regime and Islamist groups.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hiraak youth leader, Sanaa, April 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Hiraak activist, Aden, April 2011.

in 1991, when the government issued a decree supporting the state's administrative and financial decentralisation, he opposed it, declaring it would weaken Sanaa's control over the country.¹¹⁰ A prominent Southerner and government official living in Sanaa pointed out that, historically, both the al-Ahmars and General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who has close political ties with Islah, were hostile to the notion of local governance: "Generals like Ali Mohsen have an informal quota of appointees they place in local bureaucracies. It is an important component of their personal patronage networks that would be jeopardised if hiring decisions were made locally. The same is true for the al-Ahmar brothers and other prominent sheikhs".¹¹¹

Islah has been quick to point out it supports resolving the Southern issue through comprehensive reform; likewise, it underscores that Hamid al-Ahmar was the first in the JMP to call for having a Southerner as president and that he has actively drawn attention to the South's problems. Hamid's brother, Hashim al-Ahmar, who is not a member of Islah, insists that his family is not against decentralisation or even federalism. According to him, "first, Yemenis need to understand the issue well. After study, if federalism is in the nation's best interest, then they [the al-Ahmars] will not be opposed to it. But, breaking unity is the red line".¹¹² However, leaders like Hamid ultimately are more of a liability than an asset for Islah in the South because of their Northern tribal connections and legacy of support for and cooperation with the Saleh regime.

As a result, even as Islah has sought to build ties with the Hiraak and exiled leaders, it has been burdened by its past. Many Hiraak leaders inside Yemen completely reject any coordination with Islah and the JMP and criticise Hiraak leaders such as Ali Naser Muhammad and Haydar al-Attas for their willingness to join with the JMP in negotiations with the regime. Even among those who are prepared to coordinate with Islah, distrust is not far from the surface. According to a prominent Southern leader, "many people in the North also want federalism, and they are convinced that this is the best solution. But ultimately Islah does not want this outcome, because they would like to replace Saleh within the same governing structure".¹¹³

2. The Yemeni Socialist Party

The YSP is a weak and divided party with limited popular appeal in the South. Like Islah, its official position is that the Southern question should be tackled through inclusive national dialogue. Yet, its relationship with the South is

more complex. It is divided between those who favour reform within unity and those who support separation. Secretary General Yassin Numan is a long-time champion of the former; he has advocated substantive decentralisation in the past and has now embraced dialogue around a federal system in order to preserve national unity. Yet, many party members have thrown their support behind separation, whether immediate or via an interim federal system lasting four to five years. These are often Hiraak members. Tellingly, the largest and arguably most powerful body within the Hiraak, the Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South, is filled with current and former YSP members.

While the extent of the rift is debatable, there seems to be significant animosity between YSP members, mostly in Sanaa, who continue to support unity and work with the JMP and those who have joined the Hiraak and back separation. According to a YSP leader in Aden, "the YSP members in the South belong to the Southern revolution, while the YSP members in the North represent the Yemenisation of the South".¹¹⁴ Going further, a YSP member said that one reason the party has not forcefully championed the Southern case is that many members are of "Northern descent". According to him, these Northern members – including Yassin Numan – ultimately oppose the Southern cause.¹¹⁵ Defining in-group and out-group status based on ambiguous notions of ancestry is common among certain segments of the Hiraak, and Yassin has been a prominent victim of this trend. Some Hiraak supporters have gone so far as to publically mention his tribal name in order to draw attention to his Northern origins and imply he opposes a just resolution of the Southern issue.¹¹⁶

Divisions aside, the YSP continues to exert significant influence in the South through its individual leaders, connections to the Hiraak, and unique position in national politics. While Numan has come under fire for his Northern roots and pro-unity position, he still commands tremendous respect in both North and South, and in many ways is seen as a bridge between extremists on both sides.¹¹⁷ In addition, the YSP is in the unusual position of being able to use its connections within Hiraak to communicate with and influence the movement. Finally, the party can serve the Southern cause as the only "Southern" party with national-level representation, granting it a pivotal role within the JMP. Although it is more powerful, Islah cannot mar-

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Haydar al-Attas, Cairo, 17 July 2011.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, June 2011.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Hashim al-Ahmar, Sanaa, 28 July 2011.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, prominent Southern leader, July 2011.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, YSP leader, Aden, April 2011.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, YSP leader, Sanaa, November 2010.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group correspondence, Southern civil society activist, 9 October 2011.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak members/sympathisers, qat chew, Aden, June 2011; high-ranking northern civil servant, Sanaa, November 2010.

ginalise the YSP because the latter symbolises and represents the sole Southern perspective inside the coalition.

C. THE HIRAAK

The Hiraak is a loosely organised popular movement, internally diverse and fluid, that houses a number of important historical, regional and ideological trends. Composed of Southerners who oppose the Sanaa regime and are convinced that unity has failed, it accommodates a variety of views, from the pursuit of federalism with the option of separation in the future to immediate independence. Originally, the movement pushed for reform in the context of unity, with secessionists in the minority. Regime repression and the absence of reform gradually bolstered the appeal of independence. By 2011, the Hiraak essentially had become divided between those demanding immediate independence and others willing to accept federation for a period of time only, followed by a referendum on unity.¹¹⁸

Organisationally, the movement lacks a unified leadership hierarchy. A collection of groups that have changed over time,¹¹⁹ the Hiraak has both an external and internal leadership; moreover, many independents are affiliated with the movement without formally having joined its internal organisations. In October 2011, five main groups represented the Hiraak inside Yemen. The largest and most influential appears to be the Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South, established in May 2009 as an umbrella organisation. Its leadership draws primarily from former socialists and current YSP members.¹²⁰ It has

¹¹⁸ Those supporting this option argue that only individuals who were living in the South and have a Southern ID card issued in 1989 or before will be allowed to vote in the referendum. Crisis Group interview, journalist well-connected to the Hiraak, Aden, June 2011. This requirement has numerous problems, the most obvious being that it would exclude many individuals who identify themselves as Southern even though they or their families may come from a Northern governorate.

¹¹⁹ For an overview of the Hiraak's pre-April 2010 organisational structure, see Stracke and Haidar, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

¹²⁰ According to a group of Hiraak supporters in Aden, the Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South was originally called Najah (Success) but it changed its name to Majlis al-Thawra (Revolution Council) and again later to Majlis al-Hiraak al-silmi li-Tahreer al-Janoob (The Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South). This council constituted an attempt to include all movements within the Hiraak, but in reality it remained predominantly Najah, which was a group of former and current Yemeni Socialist Party members. Crisis Group interview, group of Hiraak independents and some affiliated with the National Council for the Liberation of South Yemen, qat chew, Aden, November 2010. Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South members disagree claiming that their group comprises all Hiraak organisations, not just former and current Yemeni Socialist Party members.

a significant following in all seven Southern governorates, as well as leadership councils at both the governorate and community level. Its president is Hassan Baoum, though some members also accept Ali Salim al-Beedh, Haydar al-Attas and Ali Naser Muhammad as their leadership abroad.¹²¹ The organisation currently is split between supporters of immediate separation and those who accept a two-region federalism as a transitional step.¹²²

Other important groups inside Hiraak include the Union of Southern Youth, the National Council for the Liberation of the South, the Higher National Forum for the Independence of the South, and the Green Party. The Union of Southern Youth is present in all seven Southern governorates and appears to have been gaining strength since the start of the 2011 uprising. The National Council also has broad reach, with presence in Dalia, Lahj, Aden, Shebwa, Abyan and Hadramawt, and maintains a clear pro-separation stance, even in the face of the uprising and the prospect of regime change. Members tend to be sceptical of ex-socialist leaders, whom they blame for the bloody past. They are particularly critical of the exiled socialist leadership who, they believe, betray Southern independence by negotiating with the JMP, an "occupying power no different from the Saleh regime".¹²³ They also criticise the Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South for not taking a strong enough stance in support of South-

Crisis Group interview, Omar Jubran, Hiraak Council leader in Aden, Aden, 26 January 2011. For another account of these organisations, see Stracke and Haidar, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Omar Jubran, Hiraak Council leader in Aden, Aden, 26 January 2011. The Council's leader, Hassan Baoum, has been imprisoned on multiple occasions for secessionist activities. His location has been unknown since he was taken by regime supporters from a hospital in Aden on 20 February 2011. As is common inside the Hiraak, members of this group disagree on the legitimacy of the exiled leadership. A member of the Hiraak's external leadership in the U.S., who also is affiliated with the Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South, says that only Ali Salim al-Beedh is accepted by the group. Crisis Group interview, Ahmed Muthana, Chairman of the Democratic Forum for South Yemen in the U.S. (an external Hiraak advocacy group), 3 October 2011. A youth leader in Aden contradicts this claim, saying that all three men are accepted. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, April 2011.

¹²² Naser Muhammad Thabet al-Khubaji, the Council's leader in Lahj and a former YSP parliamentarian, is an example of the former: "There is no choice but to separate the northern and Southern systems, and for the South to recover its state along with complete sovereignty. The choice of independence is the choice of every Southerner, and each day reinforces this". Crisis Group email correspondence, 5 July 2011. Others within the Council support federation during a transitional period followed by a referendum on the area's status. Crisis Group interview, independent Adeni journalist, Aden, August 2011.

¹²³ Crisis Group interview, members of the National Council for the Liberation of the South, qat chew, Aden, November 2010.

ern independence.¹²⁴ Members of this group often suffered under the PDRY and tend to be strong advocates of a "South Arabian" identity.¹²⁵

The Hiraak also has an external leadership structure. The two most active organisations are the Democratic Forum for South Yemen (TAJ) and the National Forum for Supporting the Southern Movement. Both are based in the UK, where they actively champion the secessionist cause. TAJ also has branches in the U.S., China, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia.¹²⁶ The most prominent expatriate leaders are Ali Salim al-Beedh, Ali Naser Muhammad and Haydar al-Attas. Al-Beedh is the most radical of these and perhaps the most popular among Hiraak supporters in the South. He is known for his outspoken criticism of the "occupying powers" from Sanaa and unwavering support for immediate separation. The other two have been more moderate in their demands, initially supporting Southern rights and denouncing regime brutality and only later embracing more far-reaching demands.

Today, both Haydar al-Attas and Ali Naser Mohammed support the notion of a two-region federation for a period of four to five years, followed by a referendum on independence. Both actively work with the JMP to ensure 50 per cent Southern representation in any transitional council and/or future coalition government.¹²⁷ Hiraak protesters often raise pictures of all three men during rallies and demonstrations. However, each suffers in part from a history of bloody rivalries during the socialist period, and they often provoke divisions among Southerners who were part of these struggles or who associate them with the internal divisions of the past.

While the overwhelming majority of the Hiraak supports peaceful protest and civil disobedience, a small minority has opted for violence. Its armed wing, Haraka Taqreer al-Maseer (The Movement for Self-Determination □ HATAM), was established immediately after the 1994 civil war as an armed opposition movement in Dalia and Hadramawt.¹²⁸ Now, it seems to be most active in Dalia and Radfan and, by most estimates has a maximum of several hundred fighters.¹²⁹ The group, and the armed opposition in general, could gain traction in the absence of

dialogue and progress toward resolving the Southern question.

Internal cleavages within the movement roughly can be defined in relation to four overlapping rivalries: former sultans (local rulers in south Yemen before and during the British period) and landowners versus the socialists who overthrew them in 1967; competition among former socialist leaders; divisions based on regional affiliation; and ideological differences between former socialists and former Afghan Arabs (fighters who returned from Afghanistan after 1989).

While Hiraak members are often quick to brush over these distinctions, saying they have been addressed since 2006 through a process of reconciliation and forgiveness,¹³⁰ the fault lines are never far from the surface. Thus, those vanquished by the socialists commonly express distrust toward the "old leadership", suspecting it of using popular grievances to regain power.¹³¹ Regional differences likewise are readily apparent. The Hiraak has its core support in Southern Dalia and Lahj, where the movement started and where demands for separation appear to be strongest. These areas traditionally filled the ranks of the PDRY military and formed the socialist cadre that prevailed in the 1986 civil war before being defeated in the 1994 civil war, losing considerable political and military power. The Hiraak in those regions generally is more secular and doggedly pro-independence.

By contrast, support for the Hiraak appears less ubiquitous in Abyan and Shebwa, where leaders arguably have benefited more from unity, given their alliance with the Saleh regime. Reflecting the population and its social and political preferences, the Hiraak there tends to be less secular and more deeply enmeshed in tribal loyalties. For example, the most prominent and controversial Hiraak leader in the city of Zinjibar in Abyan is a former mujahid and son of the area's late sultan, Tareq al-Fadli. Since joining the Hiraak in 2009, Fadli has been an internally divisive

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, members of the National Council for the Liberation of the South, Aden, November 2010 and January 2011.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group email correspondence, Ahmed Muthana, Chairman of TAJ in the U.S., 23 September 2011.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Ali Naser Muhammad and Haydar al-Attas, Cairo, 17 July 2011.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Omar Jubran, Aden, 26 January 2011.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, prominent independent journalist, Aden, June 2011.

¹³⁰ One of the Hiraak's challenges and goals has been to overcome bitter rivalries of the past. In December 2007, a coordinating committee composed of YSP members from Aden, Lahj, Dalia and Abyan announced a public rally for "reconciliation and forgiveness" to be held on 13 January 2008. The rally resulted in two deaths and ten injuries when shots were fired (it is unclear who fired first), and riots broke out in response to government use of tear gas and rubber bullets. See Stephen Day, "Updating Yemeni National Unity", *op. cit.*, p. 427. Efforts toward reconciliation and forgiveness are ongoing.

¹³¹ This is true, for example, for members of the National Council versus the Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South.

figure, given his links to both the regime and Yemenis returning from Afghanistan.¹³²

Despite divisions, the Hiraak has proved remarkably resilient in the face of regime repression. Its strength derives chiefly from the support it enjoys from growing numbers of Southerners as well as from charismatic leaders capable of mobilising the population through a compelling narrative of injustice, marginalisation and a history of independence. As a result, it has gained nationwide recognition as a critical representative of the South, whose voice must be heard in any national dialogue or reform process. In each major meeting in which Southerners have tried to coordinate and unify their position, the Hiraak has been recognised as a legitimate representative of Southern aspirations. Moreover, the JMP, GPC and international actors involved in negotiations over regime transition have all openly supported Hiraak participation.

Its weaknesses are nonetheless significant. The Hiraak remains plagued by problems of leadership and representation which are likely to become more complex as a broader range of Southerners seek to associate with it as a movement rather than an organisation. Although information on its finances is unavailable, there is little doubt that it has limited monetary resources and lacks concrete international support. According to its leaders, funding stems from individual supporters both inside and outside the country.¹³³ Those familiar with the movement report that financing has been a struggle from the beginning, limiting its ability to bring people out into the street: mass protests would trigger a violent regime response, leaving Hiraak with the financial responsibility to care for victims' families.¹³⁴

It also is constrained militarily. The South lost its army after the 1994 war, and many of its experienced commanders

are retired. As seen, the Hiraak's military wing, HATAM, comprises at most a few hundred men bearing light weapons. That said, there is widespread speculation that the Hiraak could rebuild a Southern army fairly quickly if civil war broke out among Northern elites, and Southern soldiers and commanders in the national army returned home.¹³⁵

D. EXTERNAL ACTORS

All major external players, including Saudi Arabia, other Gulf Cooperation Council members, the U.S., the EU, the UK and the UN, officially support a unified Yemen. Statements backing stability, unity and dialogue form a common international chorus, a point of constant frustration for proponents of separation. That said, even under the broad umbrella of "unity" Yemenis can find significant space to renegotiate the relationship between the central government and regional entities. All the above-mentioned international actors have actively supported the GCC initiative, a blueprint for a peaceful transfer of power that provides immunity for Saleh and his supporters in return for his resignation, the formation of a coalition government and early elections. The initiative also supports a broadly inclusive national dialogue to address long-debated constitutional and institutional reforms. Although the Southern issue is not mentioned in detail, both external and domestic actors tend to assign it priority status in a future dialogue.

1. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia officially supports unity, but there is much speculation among Yemenis from across the political spectrum whether this is its real position. In 1994, the Kingdom supported Southern separation and, following the war and the South's defeat, opened its borders to prominent socialist leaders. Today, many members of the exiled Southern leadership, including Haydar al-Attas, reside there. The fact that Saudi Arabia is willing to host them and other Southerners has raised suspicions among unity supporters. Given the difficulty of deciphering Saudi foreign policy positions and internal debates, Yemenis often infer Saudi positions from public statements by leaders such as al-Attas, a vocal proponent of federalism. As they see it, Riyadh's acquiescence in such advocacy signals support,

¹³² Tareq al-Fadli is arguably Yemen's most famous "Arab Afghan" or mujahid veteran of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. He returned to Yemen after unification and allegedly was involved in attacks against socialist leaders. Fadli is closely linked to the regime through General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Saleh's fellow tribesman and commander of the north-eastern military division, who defected to join the uprising in March 2011. Mohsen is married to Fadli's sister, and both men were involved in recruitment for the Afghan jihad. Before joining the Hiraak in March 2009, Fadli was a member of the ruling party's highest executive body, the General Committee. His base of support is the Fadli tribe in Zinjibar, and he has a mercurial relationship with other Hiraak leaders, at times cooperating with them and at others publicly attacking former socialist leaders. He is a pragmatic opportunist, known for quick shifts in allegiances – from the regime to the Hiraak, away from the Hiraak, back to the Hiraak, etc. – yet he retains support from tribesmen and mujahidin networks.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Omar Jubran, Aden, 26 January 2011.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Aden resident, Aden, January 2011.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interview, tribesman from al-Bayda, Sanaa, July 2011. Southern military officers are well trained; if they decided to form an army, they could gain access to heavy weaponry by taking over vulnerable military bases in the South. Already, as the state has withdrawn from the countryside in South Yemen, many small arms from checkpoints and army installations have been taken by tribesmen, especially in Abyan. Ibid.

or at a minimum tolerance, for this option.¹³⁶ To date, no evidence of the Kingdom's financial or political support for separatists has surfaced, though assistance to the Hiraak may be provided by independent Saudis.

Local perceptions of Saudi policy are further shaped by the attitude toward Hadramawt. Yemenis from both North and South commonly assert that Riyadh harbours political ambitions in the region, with which it shares a lengthy border. According to this logic, the Kingdom would either like to see an independent Hadramawt that would join the GCC or to annex it, giving the Saudis direct access to the Gulf of Aden. A Saudi-Hadramawt merger, or at least a special relationship, would be facilitated by close cultural and familial ties. Moreover, Hadramawt, with its oil reserves and small population, arguably has a similar political economy to other GCC states. Here, too, widespread suspicion lacks concrete evidence, as Riyadh has given no indication that it harbours such aspirations. Unsurprisingly, Southerners seeking independence tend to downplay Hadramawt's uniqueness, while those supporting unity often invoke the threat of Hadrami secession as an argument against opening the Pandora's Box of federalism.

2. The UK

Its colonial history in South Yemen places the UK in a unique position. It is common to hear Southerners, especially Adenis, speaking fondly of the British period, selectively ignoring the bitterness of occupation, strongly felt at the time, and instead underscoring Aden's bustling port at a time of "law and order".¹³⁷ Likewise, Hiraak members typically contrast the period of British occupation with the current "internal occupation" by the North, claiming the former was more tolerable.¹³⁸ While Britain has never indicated support for Southern secession, many Adenis view it as potentially more sympathetic to their plight. According to a prominent journalist, "unity is not possible anymore. Eventually there will be separation. Yet there is a possibility of negotiating a loose federation with British support. The appropriate mediator is Britain, because it is not seen as supportive of Saleh. Unlike the Americans, the British are viewed as somewhat antagonistic to the regime and therefore they are trusted".¹³⁹

3. The U.S.

The U.S. increasingly is cast in a negative light in the South. Frustrated Southerners see Washington's focus on al-

Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula¹⁴⁰ as a distraction from more important issues of discrimination, injustice and human rights abuses. Moreover, given strong U.S. support for Saleh in 1994, many perceive it as more resolutely supportive of unity than other international actors. Some, such as Haydar al-Attas, lay partial blame on the U.S. for the current situation in the South:

After the UN Security Council passed two resolutions calling for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations to resolve political differences, the U.S. failed to pressure Saleh to comply.¹⁴¹ At that point, I knew that if Saleh did not hold a dialogue, he would continue with his own program. After the war, Saleh marginalised the YSP [Yemeni Socialist Party]. He said the issue with the South had ended after the war, and there was no need to revise unity.¹⁴²

Today many Southerners once again are frustrated by what they consider unwavering U.S. backing for Saleh. Hiraak supporters swing wildly between passionately appealing for U.S. support and threatening to become U.S. enemies if Washington does not shift its stance. For example, a group of Hiraak supporters in Aden argued that U.S. interests would be best served through a separate Southern state because Saleh, in their view, is the main cause of terrorism and instability. They claimed that if Southerners controlled their territories, they would be better positioned to fight al-Qaeda and secure the critical Baab al-Mandab waterway. But, they added, should the U.S. and the international community continue to be silent, they would have no choice but to turn to Iran.¹⁴³ Expressing a similar view, an independent journalist said, "people are connecting the U.S. with the Saleh regime's repressive practices. If there is regime change, the U.S. will find itself out of the loop in the South, and new leaders will turn to other powers".¹⁴⁴

While supporters of separation increasingly are frustrated with the U.S., the Obama administration has in fact openly supported reforms that would allow for greater local autonomy. According to Ambassador Gerald Feierstein, the U.S. favours dialogue on decentralisation and local autonomy within a unified Yemen:

¹⁴⁰ Yemenis never use the term AQAP but rather refer to it simply as al-Qaeda.

¹⁴¹ The UN Security Council passed two resolutions (924 and 931) during the Yemeni civil war, both calling for an immediate ceasefire and negotiations and warning that political difference could not be resolved by force.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interview, Haydar al-Attas, Cairo, 17 July 2011.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Hiraak supporters, qat chew, Aden, January 2011.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Aden, November 2010.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, three Southerners and a prominent journalist, qat chew, Sanaa, July 2011.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Adeni women, Aden, November 2010.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, a group of Hiraak supporters, qat chew, Aden, June 2011.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Aden, November 2010.

The U.S. supports a unified Yemen, not separation. Yet, we are supportive of a dialogue around issues of federalism and greater local autonomy. In the course of reforms, Yemenis should guarantee greater decentralisation and local autonomy, but the way they do this is ultimately up to them and must be determined through dialogue.¹⁴⁵

VI. SPECIAL ISSUES

A. THE CASE OF ADEN

Aden is a microcosm of the Southern issue's complexities. The PDRY's former capital and prized port of the British Empire historically has been a mixing pot of Yemenis from different regions and immigrants from other parts of the world, particularly Africa and the Indian subcontinent. According to Yahya Shuaybi, the civil service minister and former Aden governor, approximately 60 per cent of its population is not from the city, and many hail from Northern governorates.¹⁴⁶

As a result of its diversity, the city encompasses a wide range of perspectives and opinions on the South. Residents with close family ties to the North generally are supportive of unity and cannot imagine renewed split. A Taizi businessman asserted: "It is impossible for me to think of the South separating. I am from Hujariya [an area in Taiz governorate], and we always referred to ourselves as Aden's countryside. When we completed school, we immediately looked for work in Aden".¹⁴⁷ Such pro-unity sentiment in Aden is frustrating for the Hiraak. A Hiraak member from Dalia who resides in Aden said, "many residents of Aden's Crater district are from Taiz and are trying to weaken aspirations for Southern independence. The government tells them that if the South separates, they will no longer be accepted".¹⁴⁸

Aden also brings into stark relief difference among Southerners. It houses the full range of Hiraak organisations and supporters, many of whom disagree vehemently on issues of tactics and leadership as well as on their preferred solution.¹⁴⁹ Equally important is a specific Adeni identity; many who consider themselves originally from Aden¹⁵⁰ are dissatisfied with both the current form of unity and the alternative of separation. Adenis possess their own narrative of victimisation, which includes suffering under

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Yahya Shuaybi, Aden, 20 November 2010, and Sanaa, 15 January 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, businessman from Taiz, July 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Aden, June 2011.

¹⁴⁹ The strongholds of the Hiraak are in the districts of Mansoura, Sheikh Othman and Khormaksar. Mansoura's protest square is particularly active and contains a mixture of Hiraak supporters from Dalia, Lahj, Shebwa and Abyan. By contrast, Khormaksar is largely dominated by tribesmen from Abyan.

¹⁵⁰ "Originally from Aden" is a term whose meaning varies depending on who uses it. Roughly speaking, those who consider themselves "Adeni" are part of a group of families who either were present when the British arrived or established themselves during British rule. Many such families worked in the British colonial bureaucracy or businesses around the port. A good number of them have Indian origins.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, July 2011.

the socialist period and under the current regime.¹⁵¹ An elderly woman from a prominent Adeni family explained:

After independence, the Southern Bedouin descended upon Aden. [Adenis routinely refer to people from outside the city as "Bedouin".] They nationalised everything, but not for the good of the people. They were thieves. They attacked Adenis and stole their homes; they behaved like barbarians. They would strip wood from buildings or break beautiful furniture to use it as firewood for cooking inside their homes. For Adenis, people like Ali Salim al-Beedh [who is from Hadramawt] are thieves and killers. He brought them into unity, stole their wealth and now wants to have an independent country again.¹⁵²

Distrust of the "Bedouin" is a common theme among Adenis who worry that separation would mean domination by politicians from the countryside. A young Adeni of Indian descent explained:

At first I was excited about the Hiraak because I thought they were standing up for our rights. But then I realised that their leaders do not trust each other and cannot change their old ways. If the South gains independence, the people from Dalia and Radfan will come to Aden and say, "we have spilt blood for independence and now we have the right to rule".¹⁵³

In light of their unique history and distrust of the countryside, many Adenis advocate a special status for their city. In the words of an Adeni journalist, "ideally, I would like to have a separate state for Aden, but other Adenis have told me not to talk about this because it is unrealistic and will hurt our cause. Instead we talk about a separate status something like Hong Kong".¹⁵⁴ Expressing a similar view, another long-time Aden resident said, "Aden should be a city-state within the South. Aden was taken by the tribes after independence from the British. Now we must have a separate status".¹⁵⁵

In addition to displaying a full range of preferences on the Southern issue, Aden also brings to light the political and economic grievances feeding the Southern movement. Almost universally, Adenis bemoan the lack of development around the port and an ailing tourism economy. The port stands out as an example of corruption and ineffective use of the South's resources, which also include oil and fish. Adenis often recall its glory under British rule,

when it was the second busiest in the world after Hong Kong, and blame both the socialists and the current regime for failing to revive its status. The Hiraak claim they can utilise Aden's port and Hadramawt's oil wealth to build a new state and provide for the South's small population, which is approximately 20 per cent of the national total.¹⁵⁶

Frustration with centralisation of power is particularly palatable in Aden. Minister of State Abd-al-Qader Hilal explained: "Aden has a specific problem. It was the capital of the South, and it has been named as Yemen's economic capital. Unfortunately, after unification, everything moved to Sanaa, including all of the ministries and public institutions. This created a profound feeling of injustice in Aden. Adenis felt that they had lost all of their privileges and were being treated like second class citizens".¹⁵⁷ Adenis from across the political spectrum, pro-regime, anti-regime, pro-independence and pro-unity, universally complain about the concentration of power in Sanaa and their city's resulting loss of political, economic and administrative authority.¹⁵⁸

Finally, Adenis are vocal in their demand for greater respect for the rule of law and for law and order. They claim their strong rule-of-law culture derives from their British and socialist legacies and resent the regime's so-called tribal mentality, which they use as a euphemism for lawlessness, nepotism and sometimes ignorance. A prominent Adeni journalist said, "law and order in the South has been lost; it is completely missing. Really, this is the heart of the problem. If law were present, people could not steal or participate in other exploits. They would have a way of solving their problems and obtaining justice".¹⁵⁹

Adenis' grievances are largely justified. The British laid the foundations for a strong legal system, and a culture valuing the rule of law continued under the PDRY despite gross injustices based on political rivalries. But after 1994, incidents involving corruption and abuse of power, nota-

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, four Adeni residents, November 2010; group of Adeni women, January and April 2011; and Adeni journalist, June 2011.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, Aden, November 2010.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Aden, January 2011.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Aden, June 2011.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Aden, June 2011.

¹⁵⁶ Estimate made on the basis of the 2004 population census. See Gulf 2000, http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Yemen_Demography_ig.jpg. In 2004, Yemen's total population was 19,694,603. As of July 2011, the CIA's "World Fact Book" gave a figure of 24,133,492.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, July 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, a variety of Aden residents from across the political spectrum, including a deputy governor of Aden; Free-Zone Authority government employees; Aden University's rector, Abdulaziz bin Habtoor; an Aden University professor; the Islah member of parliament from Crater, Insof Mayo; a GPC youth activist; Hiraak members; and a number of political independents, Aden, November 2010, January and June 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Aden, November 2010.

bly by Northern military officers, became rampant.¹⁶⁰ Many Adenis routinely complain that the existing justice system is slow, corrupt and unable to protect basic citizen rights.¹⁶¹ As the Hiraak gained strength in 2008, and particularly with the 2010 uprising, law and order also has broken down, with areas of Aden largely beyond government control and small groups of young men, sometimes armed, patrolling various neighbourhoods.¹⁶²

B. THE CASE OF HADRAMAWT

Like Aden, Hadramawt governorate occupies a special place in the Southern equation. It is the largest governorate, covering approximately 37 per cent of the country's total land mass, but is home to only 5 per cent of the population.¹⁶³ It also boasts a distinct Hadrami culture, extensive coastline, an affluent expatriate business community and a significant portion of Yemen's remaining oil wealth.¹⁶⁴ The latter is critical for the country's financial stability and would be essential for the viability of a new independent Southern state. As such, the possibility of an independent Hadramawt is equally unpalatable to the pro-unity and pro-Southern independence camps.

Advocates of Southern independence vehemently deny that Hadramawt has aspirations for statehood and claim this is a regime idea propagated to undermine Southern unity. According to a Hadrami academic and supporter of Southern independence, "a small minority in the South have talked about independence for Hadramawt, but it is not a request that benefits the South. There have always been historical linkages between Hadramawt and Aden. The minority who are pushing for Hadrami independence are being encouraged by the regime".¹⁶⁵ Going a step fur-

ther in denying Hadrami aspirations, a Hadrami leader of the Hiraak in Aden said, "the idea of an independent Hadramawt is not present. This is government propaganda to create conflicts inside the Hiraak".¹⁶⁶

Yet, despite repeated claims to the contrary, speculation abounds regarding Hadramis' political preferences. Many Yemenis appear genuinely convinced that, if given the opportunity, they would choose independence, and Saudi Arabia would support them. Many of Saudi Arabia's largest business families, including the Bukshan, bin Laden, Al-Amoodi and bin Mahfouz, are of Hadrami origin, and many suspect they would support an independent or autonomous Hadramawt. An announcement in June 2011 by the Hadrami Civil Council in the port city of Mukalla raised further suspicions. The council released a document entitled "Hadramawt: The Vision and the Path", whose declared aim was to build consensus around Hadramawt's special status within any future political arrangement. It asserted that the will of the Hadrami people has been neglected under both the PDRY and the Republic of Yemen, and it therefore proposed a bill of rights for Hadramawt to guarantee future autonomy and control over local resources. Among its most important demands:

- ❑ at a minimum, Hadramawt must be a region within the context of a federal system;
- ❑ the region must have complete rights to administer its affairs, wealth and resources, and it must receive no less than 75 per cent of the revenue deriving from these; and
- ❑ the region must have its own army and security apparatus dedicated to its citizens.¹⁶⁷

The council represents the opinions of only one group of Hadrami academics, politicians, businessmen and civil society activists.¹⁶⁸ Still, the document provides clear, public evidence of significant regional differences in the South and of specific Hadrami aspirations that will play a part in any new political arrangement. Northerners speculate that the document will have the effect of dampening Southern calls for independence.¹⁶⁹ Indeed, of all the regions that

¹⁶⁰ For examples of corruption, see Dresch, *A History of Modern Yemen*, op. cit., pp. 197-204.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, Adeni lawyer, July 2006; Adeni journalist, land owner from Abyan, land owner from Lahj, November 2010.

¹⁶² Crisis group interviews, GPC members from the North, group of Hiraak supporters, female Adeni civil servant, Aden, November 2010; security officer, Aden, April 2011; and prominent Adeni journalist, Aden, June 2010.

¹⁶³ Estimates based on data provided by the Gulf 2000 project, op. cit.

¹⁶⁴ Yemen is a small oil producer, with proven crude oil reserves of approximately 3 billion barrels as of 1 January 2011. Its oil and gas reserves come from two geographical areas: the Marib-Jawf basin in the North and the Say'un-Masila basin in the South. See "Yemen: Background", U.S. Energy Information Administration, February 2011. As of 2010, Hadramawt's Maslia block 14 contained the largest portion of proven oil reserves of any producing block, according to Yemen's Petroleum Exploration and Production Authority. Hadramawt also contains the Ash Shihir export terminal on the Gulf of Aden.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Aden, June 2010.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Omar Jubran, Aden, 26 January 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Document (in original Arabic) obtained by Crisis Group, Sanaa, June 2011.

¹⁶⁸ According to Abd-al-Qadir Hilal, a minister of state and former governor of Hadramawt, the announcement only expressed the views of some Hadramis, though he believed that they were acceptable. A number of groups within Hadramawt – including the Hiraak, Sufis and YSP – do not fully agree. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, 2 July 2011.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Abd-al-Qadir Hilal, Sanaa, 2 July 2011; and Abdulkarim al-Iryani, presidential adviser, Sanaa, 1 July 2011. The Civil Council's calls for a separate federal unit raise suspicions that Hadramawt does not want to be part of ei-

claim a right to autonomy or independence, Hadramawt arguably has the most compelling historical, cultural and economic case. While some degree of Hadrami autonomy might prove acceptable to the majority of Yemenis, it is a red-line for Northern power-brokers and Southern separatists alike. The loss of Hadramawt, with its oil wealth, coastline and wealthy business community, would be a devastating blow to either a unified Yemen or an independent southern state.

C. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SOUTHERN ISSUE AND “MIDDLE YEMEN”

Middle Yemen is a geographically misleading term that refers to the Shafei¹⁷⁰ agricultural lands south of Sanaa and north of the former PDRY. It includes the governorates of Ibb, Hodeida and, most importantly, Taiz. The latter is the most populous governorate and while located in the South geographically, politically was part of the YAR. Taiz is reputed to have the most educated population, characterised by a “civil” rather than a “tribal” ethos.¹⁷¹ It is the heart of the current protest movement, and Taizis constitute the majority of protesters in Sanaa’s Change Square, whose goal is to radically transform the political system by breaking the concentration of power in the president’s

ther a unified Yemen or an independent Southern state. The document could weaken calls for Southern independence in two ways. First, if Hadramawt goes its separate way, it would undermine the economic viability of an independent Southern state; secondly, calls for Hadrami autonomy could dampen calls for independence by raising the spectre of further fragmentation and in-fighting within the South.

¹⁷⁰ Shafei is one of the four main schools of Islamic jurisprudence in Sunni Islam. The majority of Yemenis are Shafei, while a large minority (approximately 30 to 35 per cent) are Zaydi. The Zaydi minority is located primarily in the northern highlands, whereas Shafeis are concentrated in the country’s agricultural heartland, Taiz, Ibb and Hodeida, as well as the former PDRY territories. In northern Yemen, Zaydis have historically dominated political and military power, while Shafei agricultural lands have served as a tax base and/or a centre for commerce. For a detailed discussion of how sectarian divisions overlap with shifts in Yemen’s political economy, see Kiren Aziz Chaudhry, *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Ithaca and London, 1997).

¹⁷¹ This distinction is routinely made by Yemenis but is misleading in a number of ways. First, it is difficult to verify whether or not Taizis are the most educated, especially given the predominance of Sanaa University and the focus on development in Sanaa in recent years. Secondly, the distinction between “civil” and “tribal” is problematic. Many scholars would dispute this dichotomy and consider tribal organisation to be part of civil society. See Sheila Carapico, *Civil Society in Yemen*, op. cit. Thirdly, although it is a settled agricultural area, many Yemenis in middle Yemen maintain tribal affiliations.

family and a coterie of largely tribal and Islamist elites in the North.¹⁷²

The South has a close and complicated relationship with middle Yemen. Given geographic proximity, the two areas are bound by migration, trade and intermarriage. Politically, many of the PDRY’s most prominent leaders originally came from Taiz, particularly from an area called Hujariya. Based on cultural, social and historical similarities, a natural political alliance between Taiz and Aden could reasonably be expected. Yet, this has not necessarily been the case.

Southerners currently have two opposing political perspectives on middle Yemen. The first would seek to bring the two areas closer together by proposing a new alliance to shift the political centre of gravity southward, toward the less tribal, Shafei-populated areas. It largely reflects new thinking produced by the uprising; those who support this view speak of the “old South”, the former PDRY, versus the “new South”, the PDRY plus middle Yemen.¹⁷³ According to a Taizi activist, “Taiz and the South are on one side and the people of the North are on the other, although some people in the North also want change. What the country really needs is to decentralise power and move it away from Sanaa”.¹⁷⁴

In a more cautious endorsement of a closer political alliance, a Hadrami businessman said, “If we had a federal system, the South could possibly absorb Taiz, because the people there are similar to us. But Taizis are still different. Southerners are culturally more similar to people in the Gulf than they are to those in the rest of Yemen”.¹⁷⁵ Another activist from the border governorate of al-Bayda expressed greater confidence: “If war breaks out in the North, a new state will emerge in the South, but then it will be the ‘new South’ that includes Taiz and Ibb. Right now there are discussions concerning this issue”.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷² Abdulghani al-Iryani, a prominent political analyst, argues that Taizis want more than balance: “Taizis and all of the ‘peasants’ [of middle Yemen] do not merely want to parody the system; they want to dominate the next system. They will never say this openly, but it is true. It was the same with the Shiites in Iraq. They want to destroy the old system entirely so that it can never oppress them again”. Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, June 2011.

¹⁷³ Others refer to the distinction as the “big South” (the PDRY plus Taiz, Ibb and Hodeida) and the “traditional South” (the PDRY). Crisis Group interview, civil society activist, Sanaa, April 2011.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, June 2011.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Hadrami businessman, Aden, June 2011.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, July 2011.

By contrast, a second, more insular perspective would seek to reinforce and preserve the South's political and cultural distinctiveness as defined by the PDRY's borders. This trend is characterised by a blend of pessimism over middle Yemen's ability to achieve real change in Sanaa and, at times, deep distrust for anyone considered to be from the North. A Hiraak youth leader expressed this scepticism: "The Northern protesters' words reflect only a dream. They can dream of a civil state, but it will not become a reality. Instead, the North will move from family rule to tribal rule. The two cultures – North and South – can never work together".¹⁷⁷ Others take the position that the people from middle Yemen are really no different than other Northerners:

Theoretically cooperation with middle Yemen could work, but in practice it cannot. Ibb, Taiz and Hodeida are actually more strongly opposed to a just resolution of the Southern issue than Sanaa is. All Northerners consider the South a gift from God. Their only dispute is over what piece of the cake they will get. They all have the same tribal mentality; they are the same, whether they come from Ibb, Taiz or Sanaa.¹⁷⁸

Whatever the current state of political relations between the South and middle Yemen, their futures are intertwined. If the protest movement in the North succeeds, it will create an opportunity to renegotiate the country's social contract, and middle and South Yemen would be in a position to form a powerful political bloc capable of shifting the political centre of gravity and achieving extensive devolution of power. In contrast, should the status quo prevail or the new political order that emerges remain dominated by regime insiders (such as Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar or the powerful, unrelated, Al-Ahmar family), future cooperation would be particularly uncertain.

D. AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Added to the challenges facing the South is the presence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).¹⁷⁹ Its core

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Aden, June 2011.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hiraak leader, Sanaa, November 2010.

¹⁷⁹ Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was formed in January 2009 out of a merger between al-Qaeda's Yemen and Saudi branches. It is headed by a Yemeni militant, Naser al-Wuhayshi, and two deputies of Saudi origin, Sa'id al-Shihiri and Mohammad al-Awfi, both of whom graduated from Saudi Arabia's "rehabilitation" program (a program aimed at reforming detained militants) before returning to violence. AQAP is willing and able to launch attacks both inside and outside Yemen. It claimed responsibility for the attempt to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight over the U.S. on 25 December 2009, as well as an attempt to send two parcel bombs to the U.S. in October 2010. The organisation recently has come under pressure from

membership is said to be small – between 100 and 400 – but it has a loose network of support that includes certain tribes and affiliated militants.¹⁸⁰ In the South, the organisation is particularly active in Abyan, Shebwa and Hadramawt and has a presence in Aden and Lajh.¹⁸¹ The group is shrouded in mystery, and questions abound about the scope of its influence and relations with other Yemeni parties, giving rise to an array of conspiracy theories on all sides.

In one of the most dramatic and worrying manifestations of AQAP's potential reach, it apparently joined forces with local militants and foreign al-Qaeda fighters in a group calling itself Ansar Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) and took over several towns in Abyan governorate, including the capital Zinjibar, in late May 2011. On 10 September, the government claimed to have recaptured Zinjibar from militants,¹⁸² yet at this writing battles are ongoing between Ansar Sharia on the one hand and government troops and local tribesmen seeking to dislodge it on the other. The takeover raised fears that AQAP and other militant groups might capitalise on growing instability and the erosion of government authority in the South to expand their reach.

As the situation in Abyan worsened in July 2011, local tribes began to turn against Ansar Sharia and joined gov-

both the U.S. and Yemeni governments in the provinces of Abyan, Shebwa, Jawf and Marib, where a number of strikes have killed prominent operatives. Most notably, on 30 September 2011 a U.S. drone strike killed U.S.-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki along with other top AQAP operatives, including another U.S. citizen militant who ran the organisation's English-language internet magazine, as they were travelling in the northern governorate of Jawf. See Mark Mazzetti, Eric Schmitt, and Robert Worth, "Two-year manhunt led to killing of Awlaki in Yemen", *The New York Times*, 30 September 2011.

¹⁸⁰ See Jeremy Sharp, "Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations", Congressional Research Service, 8 June 2011, pp. 8, 13-32. For more information about the ongoing debate regarding the extent of tribal support for AQAP, see *ibid*, pp. 19-21. For a recent analysis that counters claims that the tribes provide the foundation for AQAP's resilience in Yemen, see Gabriel Koehler-Derrick (ed.), "A False Foundation? AQAP, Tribes, and Ungoverned Spaces in Yemen", Combating Counterterrorism Center at West Point (September 2010). See also Sarah Phillips and Rodger Shanahan, "Al-Qa'ida, Tribes and Instability in Yemen", Lawry Institute for International Policy (November 2009); collection of articles by Gregory Johnsen in *CTC Sentinel*, Special Issue, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (January 2010); and Barak Barfi, "Yemen on the Brink? The Resurgence of al-Qaeda in Yemen", Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, New American Foundation (January 2010).

¹⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Southern civil servant from Abyan, two Southern civil society activists and prominent journalist, qat chew, Sanaa, June 2011.

¹⁸² See "Yemeni army fights off Islamists; officials say at least 230 soldiers killed in battles with Qaeda", al-Arabiya News, 11 September 2011.

ernment forces in an effort to push back the group. An Abyan politician explained that the tribes had realised the dangers the group – many of whose leaders came from outside the governorate – posed to their local communities.¹⁸³ Another local leader added: “People in my area do not care if al-Qaeda kills regime supporters. Abyan tribes may be fighting the extremists, but this is not because they like the government”.¹⁸⁴

The regime and its opponents hold strikingly different views on AQAP. According to the official regime version, AQAP and affiliate groups are a serious threat and have gained a foothold primarily as a result of widespread poverty. They also claim that Hiraak activists are working with it against the regime. The director of the president's office and head of the National Security Bureau, Ali Mohamed al-Anisi, pointedly accused the Hiraak of cooperating with al-Qaeda.¹⁸⁵ A member of the regime's security apparatus in Aden added that “the Hiraak and al-Qaeda are coordinating: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. In Abyan and Yafa, there is quite a bit of coordination; in Dalia, less so”.¹⁸⁶

Hiraak members unequivocally deny any cooperation with AQAP, emphasising their secular goal of statehood as well as their animosity toward religious extremism.¹⁸⁷ Many express deep scepticism regarding AQAP's origins and the threat it poses in the South. They describe it as a regime creation used to ensure greater Western support in its fight against domestic enemies. A Southern Islah member offered a typical opposition account:

The U.S. gives aid to Saleh, which he uses to develop al-Qaeda in Yemen. Various militant groups receive regime support, such as army postings and salaries. For example, Khalid Abu Nebi, a militant associated with a group known as the Aden-Abyan Islamic army in the 1990s, is a political partner of Saleh. While the Aden-Abyan Islamic Army is not the same as al-Qaeda, their

networks overlap. The regime is using these militants to blackmail the U.S.¹⁸⁸

In the above-mentioned June 2011 Brussels statement, Hiraak members expressed a similar view: “The spread of armed Islamist groups under numerous names in regions of the South is nothing but a political and security ploy undertaken by forces within the ruling authority”.¹⁸⁹

Indeed, even as the AQAP threat has become more acute and visible to Southern residents, particularly in Abyan, many claim that the government had intentionally ceded territory to the nebulous Ansar Sharia. Some see it as an attempt to frighten the West into supporting the regime at a time when Sanaa desperately needs its backing against the uprising. Others relate it to a domestic power play among Northern regime elites, suggesting that both the president and his main rival, Ali Mohsen, are using proxies to gain influence in the South and undermine the Hiraak's independence aspirations.¹⁹⁰ An Adeni civil society activist summarised this position:

Both Saleh and Ali Mohsen are afraid that the South will fall under the Hiraak's control. AQAP has a few genuine members in the South, but in the rest of the country it is different, because they are paid for and encouraged by different Northern elite factions. These elites think that if the South falls, it is better to have it fall into the hands of extremists groups they control. The regime uses the name al-Qaeda to receive Western support.¹⁹¹

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, July 2011.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, July 2011.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ali al-Anisi, Sanaa, 20 October 2010. As evidence of this cooperation, al-Anisi claimed that some Hiraak elements had agreed with AQAP to attack a regional football tournament, called Gulf 20, which the government hosted in Southern Yemen in November 2010. (Ultimately, no attack took place.) He also pointed to the May 2009 announcement in which AQAP leader Nassir al-Wuhayshi proclaimed support for the Southern protesters, as well as attendance by both Hiraak and AQAP supporters at a protest rally in Mafadh, Abyan, following a U.S. airstrike that killed dozens of civilians there in December 2009. Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, Aden, June 2011.

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Aden, November 2010.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, June 2011. There is some evidence of close ties between the Saleh regime and certain militant groups although any direct link between the regime and AQAP is tenuous at best. During the 1980s, Yemen recruited Yemenis, known as “Arab Afghans”, to fight in the Afghan jihad against the Soviets. When the Arab Afghans returned home, they were treated as heroes, and many received government jobs and salaries, particularly in the military/security apparatus. During the 1994 war against the socialists, Saleh mobilised thousands of Arab Afghans to fight against the South. Today, links between former mujahidin fighters and the regime still colour the government's ability and willingness to combat militant groups. In 2006, 22 al-Qaeda operatives escaped from a political security prison in Sanaa, an incident many suspect was an officially sanctioned prison break. See Jeremy Sharp, “Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations”, op. cit., pp. 13-14. Again, however, although the regime entertained clear connections with former mujahidin, this does not necessarily imply ties to AQAP, whose leadership is of a new generation, who are veterans of the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and who have explicitly made Yemeni government officials their targets.

¹⁸⁹ “Concluding Statement”, op. cit.

¹⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, two journalists, Aden, June 2011; and Hiraak youth leader, Aden, June 2011.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Aden, June 2011.

Alternatively, Southern opponents argue that the regime ceded territory in Abyan in order to neutralise the politically powerful governorate at a time of political turmoil. A prominent Abyani leader said, "the Abyan tribes believe that the government wanted Abyan to descend into war. Abyan has an important place in the history of the South and is home to many powerful leaders who occupy positions both inside and outside of the regime. The government caused the current problems so as to distract Abyani leaders from Sanaa politics".¹⁹²

For lack of evidence, it is impossible to verify these competing and often inflammatory allegations. Until now, no clear evidence has emerged of direct support or coordination between the Hiraak and AQAP. True, both engage in attacks against security and military personnel and so a measure of tactical coordination against a common foe is at least conceivable. A Hiraak supporter said, "the only basis for a relationship between the Hiraak and al-Qaeda is 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'. Beyond this, there is no connection. The Hiraak has national goals, while al-Qaeda has global ones. There is no ideological link between the two, nor direct support".¹⁹³ To the extent tacit support exists, it most likely takes place in Abyan, where the Hiraak is comparatively weak and operates in a diverse social environment in which Islamist and tribal affiliations are particularly strong.

Allegations of a regime hand in creating or sustaining AQAP have remained essentially unsubstantiated, although Southerners can point to the regime's nebulous history of alliances with Islamic militants, particularly Arab Afghans. Local residents also draw a line between AQAP's role and governmental neglect for security and development in their areas. The end result has been hesitation on the part of local communities to provide the government with intelligence about militant groups. According to a Southern journalist, "if a government official asks the average person from Abyan what is happening with the militants there, they will refuse to help, because their government has done nothing for them".¹⁹⁴

At this writing, the regime is resorting to more muscular military means to expel Ansar Sharia from urban centres. But this cannot resolve the problem. Finding a longer term solution to the threat posed by AQAP and affiliated militants will require rebuilding trust between the central government and local communities in Abyan.

VII. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS AND SCENARIOS

Four possible scenarios currently are under discussion for addressing the Southern issue and renegotiating the relationship between the central government and regional entities: a unitary state with improved central government; a unitary state with stronger local governance; a federal state; and separation.

A. A UNITARY STATE WITH A STRONG CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

Under this option, which represents essentially a continuation of the status quo, the government would improve the security situation and service provision while ensuring greater respect for the rule of law. Its proponents tend to be regime supporters who argue that the real problem in the South, as it is in other parts of the country, is the government's poor track record in these areas, and thus the answer is not power devolution. In the words of an Adeni security officer:

If the government is strong in the South, this will solve the problem. Federalism is not the answer. If the country is split, it will split into many Yemens, not just two. Federalism won't work because even local governance has failed. The current local governments are weak and have not done anything. They need a strong state.¹⁹⁵

Expressing a similar sentiment, a high-ranking military officer in Sanaa argued that the most effective solution was for the central government to enforce the law, prosecute crime and ensure the legal system addresses other problems, such as land disputes.¹⁹⁶

This view is shared by many within the ruling party but enjoys only limited popular appeal. Although it accurately identifies a popular desire for security, rule of law and services – in other words, a functioning state – it fails to acknowledge, let alone address, the South's unique history and grievances. In particular, it is at odds with the spirit of the nationwide protest movement, with deep resonance in the South, that seeks to overhaul the current system and create more inclusive, responsive and accountable institutions. Without a remedy that includes far more significant and meaningful local participation, tensions are almost certain to rise, and the ranks of those calling for immediate separation are likely to grow.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interview, July 2011.

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Sanaa, November 2010.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Aden, June 2011.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, high-ranking security officer, Aden, April 2011.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, high-ranking military officer, Sanaa, October 2011.

B. A UNITARY STATE WITH STRONG LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A second option, reflecting the ruling party's current official position and enjoying support within the opposition JMP, is to maintain a unitary state while devolving significant power to local governments. Insofar as local councils at both the governorate and district levels exclusively perform an oversight function and are severely under-funded, the government has proposed establishing local government with full authorities, giving local councils greater executive and administrative powers, as well as enhanced financial autonomy.

Several variants of this option exist, each entailing a different division of authority between central and local government. Some suggest that legislation enable governorates to retain a greater share of local resources, such as oil revenues or port duties. Local authorities also could be handed control of such sensitive issues as policing and security, which have been a constant source of tension between Southerners and the central government. The specific status and powers of local governments most likely would be ceded by the central government and protected by legislation. By contrast, under a federal system, regional entities would enjoy irrevocable rights enshrined in the constitution. To heighten the appeal of a unitary system to Southerners, such specific local prerogatives could be embodied in new constitutional provisions.

The option of bolstering the role of local governments currently is being discussed in the context of a broader package of national reforms. For instance, both the GPC and the JMP support requiring the upper house to provide equal representation to each governorate and to grant it legislative authority. There also is growing consensus around the notion of shifting to a parliamentary system with proportional representation that, it is believed, could enhance the leverage of the various localities and grant representation to smaller, regionally based parties.

Proponents of this option can be found across the political and regional spectrum. As they see it, it strikes a proper balance between Southern demands for greater autonomy and Northern fears of Southern separation. They argue that in addition to addressing core Southern grievances, establishing strong local government would have a positive impact on the country as a whole, insofar as many Northern areas feel equally marginalised by the concentration of power and resources in the capital. They too would benefit from strengthening local authorities and giving them a greater say in national institutions.

C. A FEDERAL STATE

A third option, federalism, has been gaining traction among a wide spectrum of Southerners.¹⁹⁷ Two sub-variants are under consideration: the first involving a single multi-state and the second a two-region federal system.

1. A multi-state federal system

Under this scenario, which is the least fully considered or developed of the two, Yemen would comprise between four and seven federal states, each with its own democratically elected government,¹⁹⁸ state legislature, broad administrative powers and control over local resources. As proponents see it, a multi-state federal system would provide a constitutionally enshrined check on the central government and hand broad powers to regional entities, while preserving the country's unity. This would both meet Southerners' demand for constitutional guarantees of their autonomy and reassure Northerners about the country's territorial integrity. In this sense, it would help erase old North/South divisions, instead creating a variety of new power centres within a single country.¹⁹⁹ In contrast, they

¹⁹⁷ While definitions of federalism vary, it generally is understood to mean "an irrevocable entrenchment of some level of regional (state) government within the national decision-making process, with significant powers that are protected by the constitution". Michael Gallagher, Michael Laver and Peter Mair, *Representative Government in Modern Europe* (Boston, 2001), p. 145. Federalism and local government empowerment are different ways of decentralising authority, a major difference being that the latter typically does not entail specific constitutional guarantees. Yash Ghai, "The Structure of the State: Federalism and Autonomy", in Peter Harris and Ben Reilly (eds.), *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators* (Stockholm, 1998), p. 157. For a discussion of federation, confederation and federalism, see Michael Burgess, "Federalism and Federation: A Reappraisal", in M. Burgess and A.-G. Gagnon (eds.), *Comparative Federalism and Federation: Competing Traditions and Future Directions* (New York, 1993), pp. 168-186; Daniel Elazar, "Contrasting Unitary and Federal Systems", *International Political Science Review*, vol. 18 (1997), pp. 237-251; and P. King, *Federalism and Federation* (London, 1982).

¹⁹⁸ Multi-state proposals for Yemen posit four or more states in order to avoid a three-way divide between the former PDRY, "middle Yemen" (roughly Taiz, Ibb and Hodeida) and the Zaydi highlands in the north. Proponents of the multi-state federal system believe a three-region approach presents the same problems and risks as the two-region one, namely that it would increase chances of the South's secession and reinforce sectarian fault lines by creating two states in Yemen's predominantly Sunni areas and one in the Zaydi (Shiite) north.

¹⁹⁹ For a short overview of the multi-state/federation debate, see Mohammed bin Sallam, "Federalism, the shape of things to come?", *Yemen Times*, 20 June 2011. The article presents a map of one possible division of Yemen into five federal states: Saada, Hajja, Amran and al-Jawf; Mahweet, Sanaa, Dhammar and al-

fear that a two-region solution would reinforce regional differences and inevitably lead to the South's separation.

A prominent Abyan politician summarised the case for multi-state federalism as follows:

We want federalism to be the final solution to the Southern problem, not to create more problems down the road. If there is two-part federalism, Northerners will see this as separation. While the current version of unity has failed, we must preserve unity in a different form. Unity has created shared interests and therefore it is impossible to have a Sudan solution in Yemen. Yemenis are too mixed socially, economically and culturally. If the South separates [which two-part federalism would encourage] then this will lead to war.²⁰⁰

2. A two-region federal system

This alternative essentially would re-divide Yemen between the former PDRY- and YAR-controlled territories. Participants in the May 2011 Cairo meeting put forward a plan to this effect, envisioning an extremely weak federal government formally presiding over two powerful regional entities. Advocates call for a new constitution that would establish a federal parliament composed of two chambers with equal representation from each region in both the upper and lower house and an elected federal president with both Northern and Southern deputies. The federal government would be required to provide equal representation from the two regions in senior positions; both regions would possess an independent government structure and full control over local resources.²⁰¹ Likewise, security services and police would fall under regional control.

Within each region, proponents believe local governments should enjoy broad authority. The military and national security services would be restructured on a federal basis, in other words with an equal apportionment of posts. Taking inspiration from the Sudanese model,²⁰² most advo-

cates of this solution support a referendum on unity after four to five years.

The two-region federal option appears to be gaining support among a broad range of Southerners.²⁰³ Its proponents make the point that because the South was independent prior to 1990, and the 1994 war nullified the original unity accords, its people retain the right to renegotiate their relationship with Sanaa. They see this as the only acceptable option insofar as it constitutionally guarantees the South the right to control its own resources as well as to preserve its identity and culture. Those who believe in the need for a referendum argue that the South is entitled to leave the union and should be given the option to do so in the future, but they are willing to give unity a final chance within this federal framework. Advocates of two-region federalism followed by a referendum frame it as the absolute minimum the South will accept and argue that the only alternative is separation.²⁰⁴ They claim that it is the only solution that can draw pro-separation advocates in the al-Beedh camp toward a compromise.²⁰⁵

Some who back this option claim to genuinely be open to continued unity and express confidence that if this type of federalism were properly implemented, Southerners would vote to maintain a single state in a referendum. A prominent leader from Abyan insists that "two-part federalism is not a step towards separation. If the North and the South work together in a good way and the Southerners have their rights, then there will be no problem in the future. A referendum on unity is a guarantee for Southerners that they are not exchanging the current system for a similar type of rule".²⁰⁶

Yet, what the South requires in order to choose unity is a high threshold and arguably is unachievable. According to a Hiraak youth activist, "if the people of the North develop

Bayda; Hodeida, Ibb, Taiz, Lahj and Aden; Marib, Shebwa, Abyan and Dalia; and Hadramawt and al-Mahra.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, prominent Abyan politician, July 2011.

²⁰¹ The plan calls for the following: "Wealth comprising real-estate as well as agriculture and development lands, [as well as] wealth including oil, mineral [deposits] and fish [stocks], shall also be considered the complete property of the region. The two regions shall support the federal budget according to a ratio agreed upon, and stipulated within the constitution". "A Southern vision", op. cit.

²⁰² Signed in January 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) gave South Sudan autonomy for six years, to be followed by a referendum on independence. In January 2011, South Sudan voted overwhelmingly for independence, a status that was finalised in July 2011.

²⁰³ While this option is commonly referred to as federalism in two parts, advocates are primarily concerned with a federal status for the territories of the former PDRY. If the Northern territories would like to further divide their areas, that would be acceptable. For example, advocates of this solution say that three-part federalism, in which the three parts were the former territories of the PDRY, "middle Yemen" and the northern highlands, would also be acceptable. However the North decides to divide its territory, the South would have to constitute a separate federal entity. Crisis Group interview, Haydar al-Attas, Cairo, 17 July 2011.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, group of southern leaders and activists including Haydar al-Attas and Ali Nasser Muhammad, Cairo, 17 July 2011; three Hiraak supporters, qat chew, Aden, June 2011; and group of Hiraak supporters and independents, June 2010.

²⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, attendees of the Cairo meeting, Cairo, July 2011.

²⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, prominent leader from Abyan, July 2011.

a civil state, get rid of tribalism and provide for security in their areas, Southerners may choose to accept unity". Others openly admit that this is but a step towards separation. They support two-region federalism because immediate independence would be impractical for a number of reasons. These include the fact that independence lacks international support and is not backed by a consensus among Southerners, as well as the reality that the South does not possess the institutional structures necessary to manage an independent state at this time.

The two-region federal option, it is understood, would give Southerners time to prepare for independence. As a tribesman from Lahj explained, "I am with federalism and then a referendum. We should not seek separation immediately because it is unrealistic and impractical. We do not have state institutions nor do we have clear leaders. We have no functioning economy. We need time to develop these things, and those who say we can build an independent state overnight are native".²⁰⁷

D. SEPARATION

The final option is immediate separation. Proponents envision an independent, democratic and federal state within the territories of the former PDRY. In their view, not only has unity utterly failed, but the South has an inalienable right to immediate self-determination. As they see it, the root of the problem lies neither in the current regime nor in the state structure but rather in the North's prevailing culture and system. According to a Hadrami advocate, "if the devil was in the person, then changing that person would solve the problem. But the problem is in the whole system – the laws, the constitution and the culture. The Northerners have changed many people, but their problems still remain".²⁰⁸

Expressing a similar view even more clearly, a member of HATAM said, "the South is not a laboratory for political experiments. Unity has failed, and talk of continued unity is a waste of time. The South must have immediate separation now".²⁰⁹ From this perspective, unity – even of a looser sort – cannot be to the South's benefit, because any future regime in Sanaa is bound to share the Saleh regime's "tribal mentality" and inevitably will seek to dominate the South.²¹⁰ This option, popular among some segments within the Hiraak, is considered an absolute red-line for most Northerners as well as for many Southerners.

E. EVALUATING THE OPTIONS

Claims by myriad groups to speak for the "Southern people" aside, it is virtually impossible to measure local support for these four options. As explained in this report, narratives and perspectives vary significantly among Southerners. That said, several factors seem clear. First, there is overwhelming agreement in the South on the failure of the current unity structure and on the resulting need to move toward more equitable resource-sharing, greater participation and enhanced local autonomy. Secondly, while it is uncertain which option Southerners prefer, it is safe to say that the overwhelming majority of Northerners – including those from "middle Yemen" – support policy options that preserve the country's unity. Moreover, a large Northern contingent likely would be willing to wage war to ensure that the South remains within the union.

This strongly suggests that the first and last options – continued centralised government and immediate separation – would present serious risks of violent conflict. The former would deny Southerners' legitimate demands for greater participation and control of local resources, as well as protection of local identity and culture. The latter would alienate not only Northerners, but also many Southerners who strongly prefer reform in the context of unity; and it would almost certainly lead to war.

The other options deserve more thorough debate and negotiation in order to allay various fears. For now, two-region federalism is perceived by many as a step toward eventual separation; by the same token, Hiraak supporters reject strengthened local government, even under a more democratic and representative central government, convinced that it could not respect their rights. Some form of multi-state federalism ultimately might prove the most workable and durable compromise; as such it ought to be seriously considered, debated and spelled out.

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, tribesman from Lahj, Aden, June 2011.

²⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hadrami advocate of immediate separation, Sanaa, April 2011.

²⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, member of HATAM, Aden, June 2011.

²¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak members, November, April, and June 2011.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Recent developments have improved prospects for peacefully resolving the Southern issue. But they also have substantially raised the cost of inaction. One of the unintended by-products of the Yemeni Spring has been growing support for some form of federalism – ranging from two-region federalism to a multi-state arrangement – among critical constituencies in both North and South. While it would be far from easy to carry out, a meaningful, inclusive dialogue around these options could potentially yield an outcome both stable and satisfactory to majorities on all sides. A genuine political transition, would be the optimal avenue for peacefully addressing Southerners' grievances.

The alternative is ominous. In the absence of regime change, risks of escalating violence in the South loom large. The appeal of independence remains strong; it could get stronger still if the status quo endures or the situation in the North degenerates into full-scale civil war. In turn, secession likely would trigger broader and bloodier conflict as Northerners (and possibly some Southerners as well) waged war to maintain the country's unity.

For now, Southerners appear to be pursuing two tracks simultaneously – a push for federalism by some and for separation by others. Which ultimately prevails largely will be determined by political developments in Sanaa. As Ali Saif Hassan, a civil society activist, put it, “federalism and separation are now the only two options, but the former is more difficult to achieve because it can only be accomplished through successful dialogue. If there is no dialogue or failed dialogue, then the result will be separation”.²¹¹

Paving the way for a successful dialogue on the Southern question will require several critical steps. All major stakeholders, the ruling party included, should officially acknowledge the importance of the Southern issue and commit to a fair resolution through negotiations. Such a commitment, particularly if part of a broader transition agreement, would strengthen the hand of more pragmatic forces. Hiraak supporters often go further and demand that a separate track be established for talks between a so-called “North” and so-called “South” on the Southern question.²¹² This is both impractical and undesirable; beyond the difficulties of determining who is Southern, as seen, there is no such thing as a unified Southern voice. Under the Hiraak approach, it is not clear whether South-

erners who support reform within a unified state would even have a seat at the table.²¹³

At a minimum, the parties should assign priority to the Southern issue in the context of a broader national dialogue and address it both separately and as part of a larger package of reforms. This would further reassure sceptical Southerners that their concerns will be tackled early on rather than be lost amid Yemen's many other challenges.

Southerners also need to continue their own internal debate across political, ideological and regional divides. While consensus is unlikely, these discussions could play a central role in both identifying those perspectives that ought to be represented in any future national dialogue and clarifying complex policy options, including various types of federal options.

Of course, none of this can happen without quick agreement on and implementation of a viable transition plan for the political system as a whole. For those, Yemeni and non-Yemeni alike, who have an interest in peacefully resolving the Southern issue, the priority must be to heighten pressure on the regime and opposition groups to reach an understanding on a political transition and carry it through. Otherwise, there is every reason to believe that calls for separation will gain strength, and every reason to fear further unrest and instability in the South.

Sanaa/Brussels, 20 October 2011

²¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Ali Saif Hassan, Sanaa, 24 June 2011.

²¹² Crisis Group interviews, Hiraak supporters, Aden, 26 January, 23, 24 and 26 April 2011.

²¹³ Hiraak supporters offer different answers when asked to define who would represent the South. Most say that an internal Southern dialogue is needed to determine “Southern representatives”. However, some are exclusionary in their definition. A Hiraak activist in Aden explained “that the Hiraak inside and outside the country should represent the Southern side in a dialogue. The Southerners allied with the current regime are few, and they are corrupt. There are also some with Islah, but they are not numerous, and they want an Islamic state. These Southerners will have to participate on the northern side”. Crisis Group interview, Aden, 26 April 2011. This restrictive perspective is deeply divisive and offensive to Southerners who support reform as opposed to separation.

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY OF NAMES AND ACRONYMS

- Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar** – Late pre-eminent sheikh of the Hashid tribal confederation and the founder of Islah.
- Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar** – Military commander of north-east military division and long-time ally of President Saleh. Mohsen defected to join the uprising in mid-March 2011, dividing the country's military between pro- and anti-Saleh forces. He is from the president's village and unrelated to the family of Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar.
- Ali Naser Muhammad** – Former president of the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) from Abyan governorate. Currently he is a prominent Southern expatriate leader who champions federalism in two regions, followed by a referendum on Southern independence in four to five years.
- Ali Salim al-Beedh** – President of the socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) at unity in 1990 and vice president of the Republic of Yemen during the transitional period. Currently a leading figure in the exiled opposition who aggressively advocates immediate Southern independence.
- Ansar Sharia** – Partisans of Islamic Law, an ambiguous mix of local militants, foreign al-Qaeda fighters and members of al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The group took over several towns in Abyan governorate in late May 2011, including the capital of Zunjibar. In early September the government claimed to have dislodged them from Zunjibar, but as of this writing battles were ongoing.
- AQAP** – Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula was formed in January 2009 out of the merger between al-Qaeda's Yemen and Saudi branches. In the South, it is particularly active in Abyan, Shebwa and Hadramawt governorates.
- GPC** – The General People's Congress is Yemen's ruling party. It is a broadly inclusive umbrella group that more resembles a patronage distribution mechanism than a political party with a clear ideology and platform.
- Hamid al-Ahmar** – One of the late Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar's ten sons. He is a member of Islah's shura (consultative) council, a wealthy business tycoon and an active financier of the 2011 uprising. Hamid is an outspoken opponent of the Saleh regime, although he and his family are long-time regime insiders.
- HATAM** – Haraka Taqreer al-Maseer (The Movement for Self-Determination), the armed wing of the Southern Movement. Established immediately after the 1994 civil war, it appears to be most active in Dalia and Lahj governorates and by most estimates has a maximum of several hundred fighters.
- Hiraak** – The Southern Movement (Hiraak al-Janoubi) began in 2007 as a popular protest movement for reform in the territories of the former socialist People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). By 2009, it was clearly a popular movement championing Southern independence. It is loosely organised, internally diverse and fluid. It seems to have five main Yemen-based organisations: the Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South, the Union of Southern Youth, the National Council for the Liberation of the South, the Higher National Forum for the Independence of the South and the Green Party. The first seems to be the largest and most influential and is composed largely of former or current Yemeni Socialist Party leaders. Many independents affiliate with the Hiraak as a movement but not as an organisation. Ali Salim al-Beedh, Ali Nasser Muhammad and Haydar al-Attas are its most prominent expatriate leaders.
- Haydar al-Attas** – Prominent Southern technocrat and politician who was president of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in 1986-1990 and the Republic of Yemen's first prime minister. He is now a Southern expatriate leader who supports federalism with two regions followed by a referendum on Southern independence in four to five years.
- Islah** – The Yemeni Congregation for Reform is Yemen's most powerful opposition party. Established shortly after 1990 unification by Sheikh Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, it contains a number of overlapping groups and tendencies, including tribesmen, entrepreneurs, members of the centrist Muslim Brotherhood and militant Salafists.
- JMP** – The Joint Meeting Parties is a coalition of five opposition parties: Islah, the Yemeni Socialist Party, the Naserist Popular Unionist Party, al-Haqq (the Party of Truth) and the Union of Popular Forces. The latter three have little to no popular base. Al-Haqq and the Union of Popular Forces are small Zaydi parties. The coalition was formed in 2002 to challenge the General People's Congress.
- PDRY** – The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, 1970-1990.
- TAJ** – The Democratic Forum for South Yemen is one of two Hiraak advocacy groups located outside Yemen, mostly in the UK, U.S., China, Malaysia, Indonesia and Australia. It advocates immediate Southern independence.
- YAR** – The Yemen Arab Republic, 1962-1990.
- YSP** – The Yemeni Socialist Party is what is left of the former ruling party of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). It is divided and weak, with limited popular appeal.

APPENDIX C

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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