

The Southern Gamble: UAE and the STC in Yemen



Since the war in Yemen erupted in 2015, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) has emerged as one of the most prominent local actors to assert both military and political influence. With the slogan “Restoring the State of the South,” the STC draws on a historical narrative that stretches from the 1994 civil war, through the peaceful Southern Movement of 2007, to the armed resistance that followed 2014.

Yet, the STC’s rise has not been a purely domestic phenomenon. Rather, it has taken shape within a complex regional and international context most notably through the United Arab Emirates’ military and political backing raising serious questions about the council’s ultimate goals and their alignment with regional interests.

While the STC insists its agenda is primarily political and national, its critics argue that it has contributed to the fragmentation of Yemen’s state institutions and weakened the internationally recognized government in the south. By creating parallel military, security, and administrative structures, the council has fostered a dual system of authority, which has adversely impacted citizens’ lives and broader stability.

Though STC leaders tout their success in restoring security and rebuilding state institutions, human rights reports document grave abuses, including arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and regionally motivated displacement.

Secession or Temporary Partnership?

The STC’s growing role also raises critical questions about Yemen’s unity and political future. While the council firmly upholds the South’s right to self-determination, many fear that its current trajectory entrenches separatism and deepens national divisions. Further controversy has been sparked by signs of openness toward normalization with Israel, floated by STC officials in interviews—moves that clash with prevailing public sentiment in the South.

Although the STC portrays itself as a partner within Yemen’s Presidential Leadership Council and in the fight against the Houthis, analysts contend that its military dominance has undercut the government’s authority in the interim capital of Aden.

This forced the government into constant coordination with the STC across all administrative matters—further entangling regional power plays, particularly between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, with internal Yemeni dynamics. The outcome remains uncertain, fluctuating between a fragile partnership and outright separation.

The STC’s Vision, in Its Own Words

Mansour Saleh, a senior figure in the Southern Transitional Council, told Noon Post that the STC is the culmination of a long struggle dating back to the 1994 war, continuing through the 2007 peaceful movement and into the armed resistance post-2014.

He asserted that the council's goals are clear: restoring an independent federal state in the South—a vision that predates any external intervention. “Our relationship with our brothers in the Coalition is one of respect and gratitude,” he said, acknowledging the support provided against the Houthis and terrorist groups.

Regarding the STC's involvement in the Presidential Leadership Council, Saleh stated, “We are partners in confronting the Houthis and contributing to reconstruction. This is a transitional mission that we are committed to fulfilling.”

On rebuilding institutions and improving security, Saleh said the South is taking concrete steps toward restoring state functions, citing achievements in infrastructure and administration.

“We view all official institutions as belonging to the southern state. Their reconstruction is the STC's responsibility, and we have plans to revive those that were destroyed or gutted of staff.”

Responding to criticisms that the STC destabilizes civilian life and governance, Saleh argued that the council plays a dual role in protection and rebuilding, having “succeeded significantly in establishing security and creating conditions for political normalization that pave the way for a fair settlement ensuring our people's right to determine their political future.”

He added that while the STC seeks partnerships with northern forces against the Houthis, trust remains conditional. “If we see genuine commitment from these forces, we will not hesitate to support them,” he said, while stressing that unity was entered into with sincere intent but was betrayed in the 1994 war.

“Unfortunately, some Yemeni parties still cling to a post-1994 mindset, marked by arrogance and theocratic rhetoric. Only when they acknowledge past wrongs and change their approach can we discuss the future,” he concluded.

Dual Authority and Institutional Paralysis

The STC's takeover of Aden in August 2019, following violent clashes with government forces, ushered in a new era of fragmented governance. Since then, the internationally recognized government has had to contend with the STC as a de facto power controlling security and military operations in the city drastically limiting the government's own authority and ability to deliver services.

Even after the Riyadh Agreement was signed in November 2019 under Saudi

sponsorship, implementation has remained elusive particularly regarding the integration of forces and unification of military and security agencies. As a result, Aden and other southern provinces remain plagued by dual authority and fractured loyalties.

Political analyst Rimah al-Jabri explained that the STC's military strength has deeply altered the functioning of Yemen's government from Aden. "The government has been unable to present a positive model, whether in services or security," he said, adding that clashes between government and STC forces have escalated over time.

Ultimately, the government lost control of Aden's camps and institutions, leaving it with no choice but to coordinate with the STC across the board.

This imbalance, al-Jabri added, has paralyzed state institutions and posed significant challenges to governance. Overcoming them will require unified military and security structures under the Ministries of Defense and Interior.

Addressing political and civil violations linked to military actions, al-Jabri condemned all abuses and called for adherence to national laws and agreed-upon frameworks. "All parties, including the STC, must prioritize the public interest," he said.

On the issue of foreign support, al-Jabri emphasized that it should "bolster development and stability," noting that while the government acknowledges the UAE's role, it continues to suffer from STC practices fueled by Emirati backing. He insisted that international supporters must strengthen not supplant the state's sovereignty.

He concluded by urging the government to enhance its institutional presence, maintain a firm national stance, and rely on public support through transparency and honesty. "The Yemeni people alone hold the right to decide their future, regardless of foreign influence," he said.

The UAE's Regional Calculus

Since Yemen's crisis erupted in 2014, the UAE has emerged as a central powerbroker in the south, backing the STC financially, politically, and militarily to expand its influence within the Yemeni government and southern provinces. In recent years, this has included supporting military formations and security bodies parallel to government institutions, as well as political efforts to empower southern actors.

These moves align with broader strategies by Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to solidify influence over Yemen's strategic waterways and oil routes further blurring the line between domestic politics and regional interests.

Journalist and activist Abdul Jabbar al-Jariri told Noon Post that the STC has actively dismantled government institutions in the South, seizing military and civilian offices and replacing them with its own structures. This dual authority, he argued, has eroded government control, worsened the security situation, and impeded service delivery.

Al-Jariri cited local and international rights organizations that have documented severe violations by the STC, including assassinations, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture of political opponents, journalists, and activists. He also noted forced evictions, property seizures, and regionally motivated expulsions—particularly in Aden.

He emphasized that the STC's strength stems largely from external backing, particularly from the UAE, which has enabled it to form parallel military bodies and seize strategic areas. The relationship, he said, is built on mutual interest: the UAE seeks control over maritime routes, while the STC pursues its goal of southern independence.

Al-Jariri also pointed to signs of normalization with Israel, including a recent visit by an Israeli media delegation and earlier statements by STC President Aidarous al-Zubaidi expressing willingness to normalize relations if Israel recognizes southern independence moves that run counter to southern public opinion.

He concluded with several recommendations for countering the STC's influence: uniting political forces, rebuilding state institutions on independent national foundations, promoting transparency, improving services, applying diplomatic pressure on STC backers, and advancing national reconciliation and inclusive dialogue toward a comprehensive political solution.

The UAE's Calculations and the Road Ahead

On September 13, 2025, The Jerusalem Post made a high-profile visit to Aden an event that signaled more than just a journalistic venture. The visit reflected a deeper shift in unofficial ties between certain local actors and Israel, at a time when Tel Aviv is intensifying its interest in Yemen.

Supported by the STC and sponsored by the UAE, the visit included meetings with local and military leaders and field tours in Aden and Shabwa. The Israeli delegation, which arrived via Aden's airport under the cover of the Middle East Forum, met with key figures including Major General Saleh Hassan and Defense Minister Mohsen al-Daari.

This was no routine visit. It was a calculated step in positioning the STC as a viable security and political partner for Israel. The UAE has spearheaded this strategy as part of its broader effort to reshape influence in southern Yemen

including the islands of Mayun and Socotra, where Israeli presence is reportedly on the rise.

According to a political source speaking anonymously to Noon Post, the UAE supports the STC to strengthen its presence within the government and potentially elevate its leaders to top government positions. If Yemeni unification fails, this could pave the way for the STC to govern an independent southern state.

The source noted that while Abu Dhabi does not need the STC to open normalization channels with Israel, it views the council as a valuable bargaining chip one that could offer Tel Aviv a future access point to a southern authority.

He added that the UAE is pursuing regional and global leverage, and a southern government led by the STC would offer another asset in that strategy. The real consequences for Yemen, however, will become clearer only if separation is formalized—especially concerning Saudi Arabia’s stance and whether it will accept or resist such a development under pressure.

Ultimately, the Yemen crisis remains tightly bound to shifting regional dynamics—whether through financial, political, or diplomatic interventions—ensuring that the country’s internal trajectory continues to be shaped by external forces.