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Yemeni Civil War Enters its Eighth Year

— The Impact on the Civil War of the Riyadh Agreement and the Rise of the Joint Resistance Forces —

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Introduction

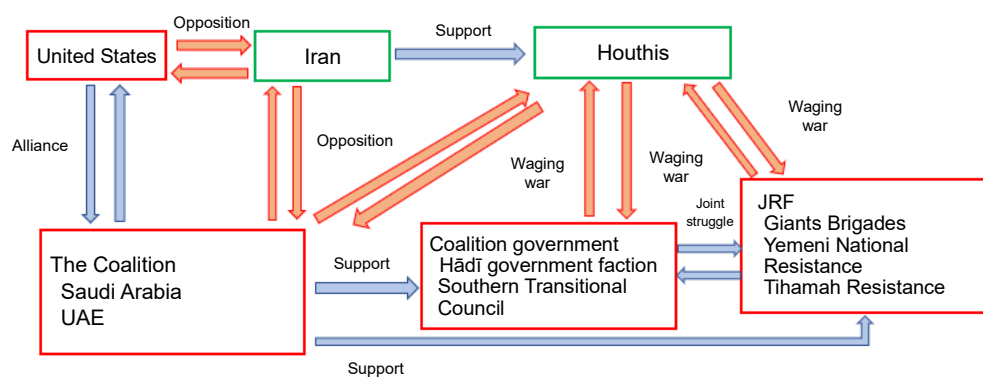
Since the Saudi-led Coalition began its intervention in the Yemeni Civil War in March 2015, the civil war has continued for seven years and is about to enter its eighth year. As shown in the overview of the civil war in Figure 1, within the country a tactical alignment of organizations including the coalition government and the Joint Resistance Forces (JRF) are waging war against the Houthis, an organization which has its origins in a Zaydism revival movement.¹ The coalition government is mainly comprised of the Hādī government faction which has received international recognition and the Southern Transitional Council which emerged from the southern independence movement. As described below, the JRF is comprised of various organizations including Salafists,² the elites from the former government, a movement to expand regional autonomy, etc., and we can see that actors based on a variety of political and social attributes are formed in a chaotic situation within the country.

Looking at this from the perspective of the security of the region, Iran is supporting the Houthis while the Coalition is supporting the coalition government and the JRF, and the Yemeni Civil War also has features of a proxy war by the major and middle-ranking powers of the gulf region. Looking at the situation from a more macro perspective, the United States, which supports the Coalition, is in an adversarial relationship with Iran. At the time of writing this paper (March 2022), the Houthis were still ruling large parts of the region which was formerly Yemen Arab Republic (YAR, North Yemen), including the capital Sanaa, but we cannot conclude that this is a situation in which any specific forces have been able to militarily control the entire territory of Yemen alone in the short period of time.

However, a united front of the anti-Houthi forces has been built gradually since about 2019, and in the short term the coalition of anti-Houthi forces appears to have a slight advantage. In this paper, regarding the joint struggle of and opposition among the anti-Houthi forces based in the region which was formerly People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY, South Yemen) and some of the southern part of the region which was formerly North Yemen, we place the focus on the two examples of the Riyadh Agreement between the Hādī government faction and the Southern Transitional Council, and the political and military rise of the JRF, and discuss their impact on the civil war overall and the prospects going forward.

¹ The Zaydis are one faction within the Shias. In northern Yemen, where the intrusion of the Sunni Islamism had been eroding the traditional Zaydi power, a movement by Houthi family advocating the revival of Zaydism has been developing since the beginning of the 1990s.

² Those who advocate a return to the society of early Islam.



[Figure 1: The relationships between the actors in the Yemeni Civil War]

Establishment of a “South-South United Front” by the Riyadh Agreement

The Riyadh Agreement is an arrangement concluded between the Hādī government faction and the Southern Transitional Council in November 2019.³ In this agreement the two parties reaffirmed the legitimacy of President Hādī (‘Abd Rabbuh Maṣūūr Hādī⁴) and agreed to launch a new government including members of the Southern Transitional Council which had been in an adversarial relationship with the Hādī loyalists. Furthermore, it was stipulated that the military forces would be reorganized under the jurisdiction of the Defence Ministry and the security forces under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. The background here is that the two parties originally belonged to the same legitimate government, but the opposition became more serious when President Hādī dismissed Minister of State Hānī bin Burayk and Governor ‘Aydarūs al-Zubaydī of the Aden Governorate in April 2017. In May the same year the Southern Transitional Council was launched with Zubaydī as its supreme leader, in 2018 it expelled the Hādī government faction from Aden, and in April 2020 it published the Autonomy Declaration. Put simply, the Riyadh Agreement was an arrangement for the two parties which disintegrated decisively in 2017 and so the two parties engaged in repeated armed clashes to return to a single governmental framework again, or in other words to encourage the joint struggle against the Houthis.

The greatest significance of the conclusion of the Riyadh Agreement is the fact that the Southern Transitional Council withdrew the Autonomy Declaration in July 2020 and this led to the establishment of the coalition government in December the same year, although one year had passed since the conclusion of the agreement. The coalition government became a “power-sharing cabinet” comprised of a variety of political parties led by the Hādī government faction and the Southern Transitional Council [Ameen 2021]. Looking at the inauguration of this government from a military perspective, we can conclude that the clashes between the Hādī government faction and the Southern Transitional Council which had continued until then were alleviated to some extent and the military force which could be projected against the Houthis increased. From a political perspective, we can point out the fact that as long as the Riyadh Agreement

³ The entire text of the Riyadh Agreement is available at the link below. Majhūl. “Ittifāq al-Riyād.”

[<https://stc-eu.org/ar/document-of-the-riyadh-agreement-between-the-legitimate-government-and-the-southern-transitional-council/>] Al-Majlis al-Intiqālī al-Janūbī. (Last access on February 19, 2022)

⁴ The transcription method of the Iwanami Dictionary of Islam is used for the transcription of the Arabic in this paper.

continued, all of the major actors involved in the civil war agreed to maintain the territorial integrity of the Republic of Yemen which was born due to the north-south unification in 1990. We can conclude that due to this the further splintering and complication of Yemeni politics was set aside temporarily and a “south-south united front” of President Hādī and Supreme Leader Zubaydī, who were both born in the south, was established.

As shown by the fact that it took one year to inaugurate the new Cabinet, however, the discord between the Hādī loyalists and the Southern Transitional Council was not eliminated by the Riyadh Agreement. For example, the aforementioned Riyadh Agreement stipulated that the military units of both parties were to be withdrawn from Aden, but the Hādī government faction is claiming that the armed organizations loyal to the Southern Transitional Council have not withdrawn [Gunaratne et al. 2022: 7]. Furthermore, the political party Islah, which supports the Hādī government faction, and the Southern Transitional Council have continued to be fiercely opposed to each other even after the inauguration of the coalition government. The background to this is that Islah is a political party which has been receiving the support of Saudi Arabia since before the civil war and in 2019 Islah and Vice President ‘Alī Muḥsin al-Aḥmar, who is thought to be close to the party, militarily stopped expansion of the rule of the Southern Transitional Council. In addition, it is thought that another factor is that there is a political faction inside Islah which is thought to be close to the Muslim Brotherhood while the Southern Transitional Council is receiving support from the UAE which views the Brotherhood as an enemy.

Doubts remain about whether or not the Southern Transitional Council has completely renounced independence. Even after the Riyadh Agreement was established, the Southern Transitional Council made statements which could be interpreted as a resumption of the southern independence movement, including hinting at revocation of the agreement and preparation for negotiations with the Houthis, etc., and it attempted to destabilize the Hādī government faction. Furthermore, the official site of the organization posts the meetings of its top officials, etc. which include photographs, but the map of Yemen which appears in those photographs does not show the region which was formerly North Yemen; in other words it shows the ideal national territory aimed for in the Autonomy Declaration (the territory of the former South Yemen).⁵ The displayed flag is also the national flag of the former South Yemen, and the flag of the current Republic of Yemen is nowhere to be seen. Based on these points, it can be concluded that the stance of the Southern Transitional Council concerning independence remains unclear in some respects.

Features and Participation in the War on the Eastern Front of Each Organization under the Umbrella of the JRF

The JRF is comprised of three organizations, and it rules a part of the west coast region which has thriving agricultural production and good ports, and includes Al Hudaydah Governorate, Taiz Governorate, etc. Below we organize the basic information about each organization under the umbrella of the JRF and explain about their participation in the war on the eastern front in November 2021.

⁵ Refer to the photo in the following link as an example.

Anonymous. “Major General Bin Brik Confirms STC’s Support for Popular Movements in Hadhramout to Get Their Legitimate Rights.” Southern Transitional Council. (December 14, 2021) [<https://en.stcaden.com/news/10135>] (Last access on February 28, 2022)

The first organization is a Salafist organization called the Giants Brigades, which is seen as the largest force of the JRF. Many of the people in this organization were born in the southern region and in addition people who were expelled from the Saada Governorate by the Houthis are also participating in it.⁶ The Giants Brigades is considered to be a pro-Hādī government faction, and as far as this author has been able to confirm it has not made any anti-government faction claims, such as for independence, etc.⁷ Although the Giants Brigades makes claims which conflict with the ideas of Salafism, namely the Zaydism revival, and has engaged in combat against the Houthis who expelled them, it is unlikely that they currently have any political ambitions beyond that.

The second organization is the Yemeni National Resistance led by Ṭāriq Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ (hereinafter referred to as “T. Ṣāliḥ”), the nephew of previous president ‘Alī ‘Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ (hereinafter referred to as “A. Ṣāliḥ”). The establishment of the Yemeni National Resistance has its roots in December 2, 2017 when previous president A. Ṣāliḥ abandoned the joint struggle with the Houthis and was subsequently killed by that faction. It is reported that there are many people in this organization who were formerly in the Yemeni Republican Guard, which was a strong support base for previous president A. Ṣāliḥ, and it has set the goals of regaining control of the capital Sanaa and rebuilding the republic. The Yemeni National Resistance is seen to be receiving support from the UAE in the same way as the Giants Brigades, and there have been reports that the UAE is paying salaries to the fighters of the Yemeni National Resistance denominated in the Saudi Arabian Riyal [Gunaratne et al. 2022: 67]. Furthermore, T. Ṣāliḥ’s son Muḥammad Ṭāriq Ṣāliḥ graduated from the Zayed II Military College in the UAE in 2022, so strong ties between the UAE and the Yemeni National Resistance can be inferred [Majhūl, Wikāla al-Thānī min Dīsambir 2022].

In March 2021 the Yemeni National Resistance established the Political Bureau as its own political branch. T. Ṣāliḥ has presented the position that the Political Bureau is not an alternative to the General People’s Congress (GPC) political party which formerly held the reins of the government, and that the coalition government is the legitimate government. In addition to that, T. Ṣāliḥ founded the bureau to represent Yemeni citizens outside the framework of religious political groups and handle negotiations going forward [Anonymous, Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies 2021]. However, as indicated in the report of the United Nations Security Council Panel, T. Ṣāliḥ was dissatisfied about being excluded from the existing political negotiations leading up to the Stockholm Agreement⁸ and that intention can also be inferred from his objectives in establishing the aforementioned Political Bureau [Gunaratne et al. 2022: 66]. Moreover, the Yemeni National Resistance denies the significance of the overthrow of the government by the 2011 anti-government movement (the so-called “Arab Spring”), so its political claims do not completely match

⁶ Although the Saada Governorate is the core base of the Zaydis, it is also the center of Salafism in Yemen as seen in the activities of Muqbil bin Hādī al-Wādī’ī.

⁷ The supreme leader of the Yemeni National Resistance under the umbrella of the JRF has also stated that the Giants Brigades are very religiously conservative and do not get involved in political affairs. Anonymous. (2021). “The Battle of All Yemenis Against the Houthi Coup’ – A Q&A with Tareq Saleh.” Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies.

[<https://sanaacenter.org/publications/main-publications/14185>] (Last access on February 25, 2022)

⁸ An agreement including a ceasefire in the port city Hudaydah, etc. which was concluded between the Houthis and the Hādī government faction in December 2018.

those of the Hādī government faction which was established by that movement. Based on this point too, it can be concluded that the rebuilding of the republic advocated by the Yemeni National Resistance does not merely mean military victory against the Houthis and subservience to the Hādī government faction; it also entails political ambition by the Yemeni National Resistance for itself.

Another interesting organization of the Yemeni National Resistance is an organization called the Women's Bureau inside the Political Bureau, and its activities are frequently reported on the Yemeni National Resistance's official news site, the December 2 News Agency. Regarding this point, we can conclude that the Women's Bureau has become an important way for the Yemeni National Resistance to publicize secular elements and also differentiate itself from the coalition government, which has no women cabinet ministers.

The third organization is the Tihamah Resistance. This organization was established in 2014 as the military branch of the Tihamah Peace Movement (established 2011), a movement demanding expanded autonomy for the west coast region. It can be seen that the Tihamah Resistance is also receiving support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but it has been pointed out that it lacks unity as a group compared to other organizations such as the Southern Transitional Council, etc. [Horton 2020]. Note that it is considered that the Tihamah Peace Movement has found its identity in a regional framework, namely the west coast region, but it has not advocated independence like the Southern Transitional Council [Jalal 2021].

The JRF has placed a part of the Al Hudaydah Governorate and the Taiz Governorate under its rule while on the other hand in November 2021 it withdrew from the front line of the Al Hudaydah Governorate and carried out a redeployment to the front lines of the Shabwah Governorate and Marib Governorate.⁹ Due to these auxiliary troops, it battled back on the eastern front where the Houthis had been intensifying their offensives and in December 2021 the Giants Brigades regained control of the Shabwah Governorate from the Houthis and in addition it is engaged in combat to regain control of the Marib Governorate as well. Marib Governorate not only has oil fields; it is also the last base in the region which was formerly North Yemen for the Hādī loyalists and is also the location of the command headquarters for the Yemeni military's third military district, so it has been positioned as a critical strategic point¹⁰ [Hetari 2021].

The JRF had not only the aforementioned military impact; it also brought about new options for the Saudi Arabia-led Coalition and Yemeni politics. President Hādī is unpopular as an individual who issues instructions from Riyadh to military people and politicians remaining inside Yemen, and doubts have arisen about the ability of the legitimate government. For example, the salary levels of the soldiers of the Hādī government faction are low. Furthermore, it is thought that the Southern Transitional Council participating

⁹ This invited a backlash from the Tihamah Resistance which focuses on the front line in the west coast region and a letter of protest was declared jointly in the names of the Tihamah Resistance and the Tihamah Peace Movement (No. 4 document of 2021).

[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=410461177466857&id=116726376840340&__tn__=K-R] (Last access on February 28, 2022)

¹⁰ Refer to the following regarding the military districts of the Hādī government faction.

Majhūl. "Qarār Ra'īs al-Jumhūrīya bi Taqīm Masrah al-'Amaliyāt al-'Askariya li al-Jumhūrīya al-Yamaniya wa Tasmiya al-Manāṭiq al-'Askariya wa Ta'yīn Qiyāda-hā." Al-Mawqi' al-Rasmī li Ra'īs al-Jumhūrīya al-Yamaniya. (April 10, 2013)

[<https://presidenthadi-gov-ye.info/ar/archives/11298>] (Last access on February 27, 2022)

in the coalition government is unmotivated about regaining control of the northern region, and it can be seen that in the aforementioned combat in the Marib Governorate as well that the majority of their military operations against the Houthis are for the purpose of defense [Gunaratne et al. 2022: 61]. In this kind of situation, the rise of the JRF and the organizations under its umbrella which are thought to have different political claims and support bases is thought to mean the influence of anti-Houthi groups who do not endorse the existing Hādī government faction and Southern Transitional Council is growing.

[Table 1: Comparison of the military interests and political claims of the organizations comprising the JRF]

	Military interests	Political claims
Giants Brigades	Expel the Houthis	Support for the Hādī government faction
Yemeni National Resistance	Regain control of Sanaa	Rebuild the republic
Tihamah Resistance	Regain control of the west coast region	Expanded autonomy for the west coast region

(Source) Created by the author from Anonymous (Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, 2021), Horton (2020), and Jalal (2021)

Hints for the Civil War and Prospects Going Forward

As we have seen so far, due to the Riyadh Agreement and the rise of the JRF the various actors have been engaging in a joint struggle against the Houthis while also dealing with internal opposition. As in the typical example of the aforementioned Giants Brigades regaining control of the Shabwah Governorate, we can perhaps reach the conclusion that the joint struggle is producing results from the perspective of military solutions. Furthermore, seen from the point of view of the Saudi-led Coalition, which has Saudi Arabia and the UAE at its core, it can be concluded that the Coalition has been able to reduce “internecine fighting” because the various forces within Yemen are agreed on opposing the Houthis. However, this does not mean that the civil war will always develop in an advantageous way going forward and it is necessary to continue to closely monitor the situation.

There is a possibility that building a united front of the anti-Houthi forces is contributing to the end of the civil war by military means, while on the other hand it can be concluded that the situation is conversely become more complex with regards to a political solution. Below we indicate three political problems that are occurring at the moment or could occur going forward due to the powerful forces forming in a chaotic situation.

(i) The treatment of T. Šāliḥ and the Yemeni National Resistance

The Yemeni National Resistance led by T. Šāliḥ has not joined the coalition government and regards the Hādī government faction as the legitimate government. However, as is clear from the aforementioned establishment of the Political Bureau, they, unlike the Giants Brigades, have their own political claim to “rebuild the republic” and are intending to realize that after they regain control of Sanaa. Even supposing

they succeed in expelling the Houthis going forward, President Hādī will no doubt face internal opposition surrounding the treatment of T. Şāliḥ. Furthermore, the presence of T. Şāliḥ, who claims to be rebuilding the republic, is a barrier for the Southern Transitional Council which has its roots in the southern independence movement, so it is not difficult to imagine opposition between these two parties.

For that matter, as mentioned above, T. Şāliḥ is the nephew of previous president A. Şāliḥ who was overthrown in the 2011 anti-government movement. If T. Şāliḥ took up an important position in the military or government of the Hādī government faction, that would seriously damage the legitimacy of the Hādī government faction for which the fact that it was born from the will of the people after the anti-government movement is the only basis for its existence. In other words, although at the moment there is agreement on opposition to the Houthis so this issue is not coming to the surface, looking at the medium to long-term, it can be concluded that the treatment of T. Şāliḥ will influence the outcome of the 2011 anti-government movement in Yemen.

(ii) The southern independence movement and expanded autonomy

As mentioned above, there is a lack of clarity in some respects regarding whether the Southern Transitional Council, which has joined the coalition government, has renounced its claim for independence. The Southern Transitional Council is trying to ascertain the course of events in the civil war and is probably thinking that there is room for political negotiations with the Houthis who are based in the northern Zaydis region. In other words, the possibility that the Riyadh Agreement will collapse as a result of the course of the war is constantly smoldering beneath the surface.

Furthermore, the expanded autonomy of the west coast region demanded by the Tihamah Resistance and Tihamah Peace Movement, which are engaging in combat under the umbrella of the JRF, is also gaining attention. If the unity of the Republic born in 1990 were lost due to political trade-offs, the possibility could arise that the political forces in the Hadhramaut region and on Socotra island, etc., which each have their own unique history and culture, would make claims for separation and expanded autonomy. Furthermore, the expansion of demands for separation and autonomy would lead to opposition from the Hādī government faction and the Yemeni National Resistance which place value on unity as a republic, as discussed in (i). In this way, looking inside the anti-Houthi forces, we can see they have a composition which means political gains for some of the forces are losses for some of the other forces, so it can be concluded they are falling into a political deadlock.

(iii) Security sector reforms

As a consequence of the Yemeni Civil War, a variety of military organizations are formed in a chaotic situation, and in particular the powerful forces have established police organizations within the regions they rule, so security sector reforms are becoming more complex. For example, reorganization of the armed forces is a policy that President Hādī placed importance on to eliminate the influence of previous president Şāliḥ after the 2011 anti-government movement, and is also a theme that became a factor contributing to the civil war. However, the Coalition, in particular the UAE, is providing support to many organizations other than the Yemeni armed forces which support the Hādī government faction, encouraging greater

complexity in the security sector reforms. Furthermore, it can be seen that Iran is also providing drones and missile components to the Houthis, and as a result the situation has developed into a civil war among highly-armed domestic organizations and asymmetric warfare between the Houthis and the Coalition. At a time when not even any signs can be seen of ending the civil war, either by military or political means, it is too early to address the theme of security sector reforms, but it will no doubt be an important topic of discussion when the current civil war ends (or Yemen becomes a *de facto* divided state, etc.).

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