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Knowledge for All



The Southern Movement in Yemen

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“Unity or death” (*al-wahdah aw al-mawt*)—that is the slogan written next to the picture of Yemen’s President Ali Abdullah Saleh on a big poster on ‘Street Seventy’ in Sana’a. The government leaves nobody in doubt that defending the unity of Yemen is top priority. At the same time, there are regular reports about clashes between Southern Yemenis and government forces in the governorates of Lahij, Shabwah, Ad Dali’ and Abyan giving the impression that there is a growing security problem deriving from the Southern Movement with the potential to challenge the authority and legitimacy of the government in Sana’a and the unity of Yemen. But how strong is the Southern Movement in Yemen, what are its objectives and what are the initiatives to solve the problems in the south?

Protests by Southern Yemeni opposition groups against the central government are not a new phenomenon in Yemen; organized protests and demonstrations started after the end of the Civil War in 1994 and are continuing until today. In 1997, popular committees were established which criticized the conduct of the central government and the administration in the south of the country. In December 2003, “the Forum of the Sons of Southern and Eastern Provinces” demanded equality between people in the north and the south, more power for local governments in the south, and an end to the marginalization of South Yemenis in the political process.

In January 2006, a group of retired southern army officers started protest rallies laying the foundation of the “South Yemen Retired Army Officers Committee” which was established in 2007.²

In our research we were able to identify the main groups currently involved in the Southern Movement. At least seven of them operate in South Yemen:³

The Higher National Forum for the Independence of the South

(الهيئة الوطنية العليا لاستقلال الجنوب)

Leader: Brigadier (retd.) Nasser al-Nuba

(ناصر النوبة العميد المتقاعد)

This group has a presence in the governorates of Shabwah and Ad Dali’ with some activities in the governorates of Abyan and Hadramaut.

The Higher National Council for the Liberation of the South

(المجلس الوطني الاعلى لتحرير الجنوب)

Current Leader: Nominal leader Hasan Ba’aum (حسن باعوم) is currently abroad for medical treatment.

Active Leader: Mohammed Salih Tammah (محمد صالح طمّاح)

This group has a presence in the governorates of Lahij and Ad Dali’ with some activities in Hadramaut and Abyan and has ties with the TAJJ movement based in London.⁴

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² <http://www.alsahwa-yemen.net> (April 6, 2010)

³ This section is based on interviews conducted by the authors in Sana’a and Shabwah in April 2010. We would like to thank in particular Said Mohammed al-Dweel, President of the Association of Democratic Youth in Hadramaut, Shabwah and Al Mahrah and political activist Mustafa al-Halimiyy of the Yemeni Socialist Party (phone interview conducted on April 23, 2010). The paper does not necessarily provide a literal translation from Arabic to English.

⁴ There are two active opposition groups outside of Yemen, both in the UK: “TAJJ-Democratic Forum of South Yemen” in London and “The National Forum for Supporting the Southern Movement” in Sheffield.

Movement of the Southern Peaceful Struggle – “Success” (نجاح) - حركة النضال السلمي الجنوبي

Leaders: Salah al-Shanfara (صلاح الشنفرة) and Nasser al-Khubbaji (ناصر الخبجي)

Both are members of Yemen’s Parliament and of the Yemen Socialist Party. The group is mainly located in Ad Dali’, Lahij, and Abyan governorates.

Union of the Southern Youth (اتحاد شباب الجنوب)

Leader: Fadi Hasan Ba’aum (فادي حسن باعوم) was sentenced by a court in Yemen to five years’ imprisonment on March 29, 2010.

The “Union of the Southern Youth” was initially established as part of the “Higher National Council for the Liberation of the South” which is headed by Hasan Ba’aum, Fadi’s father. Now the “Union of the Southern Youth” is expanding into an independent organization and is active in several governorates among them Shabwah, Abyan, Lahij, Ad Dali’ and Hadramaut and has ties with the TAJJ movement based in London.

The National Forum for the Southern Peaceful Struggle (الهيئة الوطنية للنضال السلمي الجنوبي)

Leader: Dr. Saleh Yahya Said (صالح يحيى) (سعيد الدكتور) is professor of sociology at the University of Aden.

The group is active in the city of Aden (particularly among academics and political activists) with a small presence in Shabwah. It has some links with the TAJJ movement based in London.

Council for Leading the Peaceful Revolution (مجلس قيادة الثورة السلمية)

Leader: Sheikh Tariq al-Fadhli (طارق الفضلي)

The group is mainly located in the Abyan governorate and its capital Zinjibar. It has a smaller presence in the Shabwah governorate. The “Council for Leading the Peaceful Revolution” merged in early 2010 with sections

of “The Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South.”

Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South (مجلس الحراك السلمي لتحرير الجنوب)

The Council was established in January 2010 to act as an ‘umbrella organization’ for all Southern opposition groups. Its declared aim is to unite the Southern Movement under one command. Hasan Ba’aum was nominated as the leader while Sheikh Tariq al-Fadhli was nominated as deputy leader. However, apart from issuing statements, the Council remains inactive and its leadership has limited influence over the different factions of the movement.

Factors Contributing to the Weakness of the Southern Movement

The Southern Movement lacks a unified leadership and central organization

The Southern Movement is united in its opposition to the central government and in demanding equal opportunities for the people in the south. However, the disunity among the groups in the movement is evident in their strategy and tactics. The movement evolved from a number of independent groups and, at present, has no central council that can develop a common agenda and coordinate activities. Most of the groups involved in separatist activities work independently and often in competition with each other. In fact, the movement is characterized by deep divisions as the leadership of each group tries to impose its own agenda. The leadership of the separatist groups not only differs in their political agenda and objectives, but also in their political beliefs and ideology. While the leaders in the provinces of Aden, Lahij, and Ad Dali’

mainly include ex-socialists and former military officers, the groups in Abyan in particular are influenced by tribal and religious factors.⁵

In the past, many attempts were made to unite the Southern Movement but mostly they failed. Some of the groups, such as the “Council for Leading the Peaceful Revolution” under the leadership of the former Jihadi and tribal leader Tariq al-Fadhli, have tried to establish themselves as the main representatives for the entire south; in a recent attempt, al-Fadhli’s groups tried to merge with the “Council of the Peaceful Movement to Liberate the South,” but so far neither al-Fadhli nor any other political figures of the Southern Movement have been recognized as legitimate leaders representing the interests of the people of South Yemen. Meetings between the two leaders of former South Yemen, Ali Salim al-Beidh and Ali Naser Mohammed, in Beirut in January 2010 have further shown the difficulties of uniting the southern opposition.⁶

Going by the current trends, it seems that the groups of the Southern Movement are growing in terms of members, supporters, and sympathizers, and broadening networks and activities in the main cities of the south. While at the beginning of 2008 the activities of most of these groups were limited to one local area or one governorate, this has changed over the past year as they have begun to expand their activities across governorates. Now, most of the groups are active in at least three of the South Yemeni governorates (Ad Dali’, Lahij and Abyan).

However, the seven groups differ widely in terms of actual strength and influence. The “Success Movement” led by Salah al-Shanfara and Nasser al-Khubbaji and the “Council for Leading the

Peaceful Revolution” under al-Fadhli appear to be the strongest groups in terms of number of supporters. The Fadhli group numbers thousands of people overall in Abyan, Ad Dali’, Lahij and a few hundreds in the governorate of Shabwah. The group has displayed its ability to recruit activists and mobilize supporters. Yet, the question of legitimacy remains, as many southern people look at the leadership of al-Fadhli with suspicion. As a former member of the ruling party, the General People’s Congress (GPC), and member of Shura Council, al-Fadhli is widely seen as an opportunist who is trying to promote his self-interest. Most people in the south do not rule out that al-Fadhli would stop his anti-government activities in the south if the government made him an attractive offer that gave him more political influence and agreed to his demands on land ownership which have been disputed by the government.

The “Higher National Council for the Liberation of the South” under Hasan Ba’aum and the “Union of the Southern Youth” led by his son Fadi Hasan Ba’aum have the potential to become stronger in future; in particular the “Union of the Southern Youth” is the only group that provides a platform for the youth and is expected to have a bigger inflow of members in future.

The “Higher National Forum for the Independence of the South” led by Brigadier Nasser al-Nuba seems to have only limited influence. While Brigadier al-Nuba was one of the first to lead the protests by ex-South Yemen army officers back in 2007 – initially the protest was organized by the “South Yemen Retired Army Officers Committee” – his leadership was challenged by other retired officers.⁷ Army officers questioned his legitimacy as a spokesperson for the Officers’ Committee and

5 Al-Quds Al-Arabi, March 7, 2010.

6 Elaph (Yemen), January 26, 2010 and February 15, 2010.

7 See <http://www.hewarye.com>

some of them criticized him for leaving Yemen during the civil war in 1994. As a result, the “Retired Army Officers Committee” split and Brigadier al-Nuba went on to found the “Higher National Forum for the Independence of the South.” However, with the government’s recent initiatives to reinstate and reintegrate some of the ex-army officers into the armed forces institutions and provide higher pension to others, the group has lost some of its influence.

The Southern Movement Lacks Crucial Outside Assistance

Initially, some of the Southern Movement groups were said to be receiving financial support from sections of the South Yemeni business community settled in other parts of the world. In fact, a southern opposition group was able to set up and operate a UK-based satellite TV station called “Free Aden TV Channel” and through its broadcasts promote the idea of separation. The channel also broadcast statements of the former leader of the Republic of South Yemen, Ali Salim al-Beidh.⁸

However, the picture has changed and currently the different groups of South Yemen lack essential outside support. None of the Arab or Gulf governments has shown interest in supporting the breakup of Yemen:

- A divided Yemen would not necessarily disintegrate into two – South and North – but more likely in to a number of entities. This would encourage more violence not only between the North and South but also among southerners leading to further instability and potentially to a civil war. The door would be opened then for outside intervention leading to the destabilization of the entire Gulf region.

- Some of the regional states suspect that the Yemeni separatist movement is motivated mainly by the objective of controlling economic resources in the country, in particular the oil resources. The success of the movement in Yemen could encourage other ambitious tribal or sectarian groups in the Gulf region to target the territorial integrity of some of the Gulf States, something none of the Gulf regimes would like to see.

- The overall lack of support from international powers to the Yemeni Southern Movement also influences the attitude of the regional states.

In fact, the Gulf States have given clear indications of their support for the Yemeni central government and the unity and territorial integrity of Yemen. During the GCC summit held in December 2009 in Kuwait, the six GCC members assured the Yemeni leadership of their full support for the unity and stability of Yemen. States such as Saudi Arabia have emphasized that maintaining the unity of Yemen is priority.

Such public commitments have been matched by decisive action to support the Yemeni government. During April 2009, the Yemeni leadership reportedly asked the Saudi government to prevent two former South Yemeni leaders residing in Saudi Arabia from undertaking political activities in support of the separatist groups. Two months later, Yemen asked the Saudi government for help in blocking financial support which was reportedly being sent to some groups of the Southern Movement by Saudis of Yemeni origin and Yemeni citizens living in the Kingdom. It is believed that the Saudi authorities responded positively to the Yemeni government’s requests and acted swiftly to prevent the alleged political activities and to deal with the issue of illegal finance.⁹ Further,

⁸ Mareb Press, September 10, 2008; Elaph (Saudi Arabia), July 7, 2009.

⁹ Elaph (Yemen), April 29, 2009 , June 9, 2009.

it was reported that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had sent a letter to a number of leading Saudi businessmen based in his country (mostly of South Yemeni origin) asking them to refrain from supporting any groups in South Yemen.

Oman has a similar view; like Saudi Arabia, it prefers and supports a united Yemen. In May 2009, the Omani government withdrew Ali Salem al-Beidh's Omani passport (or citizenship) and canceled his residency rights in Oman, a privilege he had been enjoying since 1994. The Omani attitude was quite clear – it was stated that al-Beidh had violated the terms of his political refugee status, a privilege which had been granted to him on the clear condition that he will not involve himself in any political activities or in any “hostile action” against his home country.¹⁰ In May 2009, Sultan Qaboos sent a letter to President Saleh expressing Oman's strong support and commitment to Yemen's unity.¹¹ As part of the effort to show Arab states' solidarity and support to Yemen's unity, even the Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi has refused to grant a visa to al-Beidh to visit Libya.¹²

The lack of outside support makes organized and effective opposition much more difficult for the Southern Movement groups in Yemen and clearly limits their strength:

- It affects the groups' ability to mobilize support and carry out a massive propaganda campaign
- It limits the ability of the opposition groups to open offices in the region and beyond and thereby influence public opinion and generate sympathy.

In fact, the support that the issue of Yemen's unity has received in the region and beyond has had an adverse impact on the financial

resources of the separatist groups. The lack of financial contributions from outside the country has limited the influence of these groups and prevented them from developing lobby groups or establishing newspapers and TV channels to support their cause. Even the establishment of the “Free Aden TV Channel” had a limited effect as all regional satellite TV companies refused to grant it regional access.

- Further, the lack of financial support limits the possibility that southern groups will be able to buy arms or form militias to challenge the government's security forces.

It could be assumed that the lack of financial support also affects the Southern Movement's unification efforts. If one group had access to secure and sustainable financial resources, its position would be strengthened, and this could possibly facilitate the establishment of a unified central leadership that in time could pose a serious challenge to the central government.

Initiatives to Solve the Conflict in the South

Regional Mediation

A number of cautious steps have been taken in the Arab Region to mediate the conflict between the Yemeni central government and the political opposition groups in and outside South Yemen. Following a visit to Yemen at the beginning of October 2009, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa expressed his commitment to support Yemen's unity, security and stability and demanded a comprehensive national dialogue to solve the problem in the south. Since then, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia have shown interest in mediating the conflict in the south.¹³ In October

¹⁰ Elaph (Saudi Arabia), May 12, 2009, BBC Arabic, May 22, 2009.

¹¹ Al Sharq al Awsat, May 26, 2009.

¹² Elaph (Yemen), July 21 2009.

¹³ Elaph (Yemen), October 13, 2009.

2009, the Egyptian Foreign Minister and the head of Egyptian Intelligence went to Riyadh and then on an official visit to Sana'a to express their country's full support for Yemen's unity and offer mediation; they also met with some of Yemen's opposition leaders in Cairo.¹⁴

Further it was reported that al-Beidh had contacted Secretary General Amr Moussa to ask for the Arab League's intervention to settle the problem.¹⁵ However, the repeated requests of al-Beidh for Arab support have met with clear rejection from the Arab countries as he was calling openly for the separation of South Yemen. Egypt and possibly other Arab states are likely to veto his participation in any future negotiations. At one stage, al-Beidh asked for help and support from Iran, a call which generated strong resentment among the Arab governments.¹⁶

Even Syria which has traditionally maintained good relations with the Socialist leaders of the former South Yemen – giving refuge to Ali Nasser Mohamed and some of his colleagues – made some mediation efforts. In February 2010, the Assistant General Secretary of the ruling Ba'ath party in Syria, Abdullah Al-Ahmer, visited Sana'a hoping to initiate a political solution to the problem.¹⁷

Yemeni Government Strategies

The government has undertaken some initiatives to solve the conflict in South Yemen. After the first wave of protests in 2007 led by ex-army officers of the disbanded Southern army demanding reintegration in the state's armed

forces and increased pension, the government tried to deal quickly with this issue. Within months, the government reportedly reinstated 2,106 ex-military officers into the army; some were even promoted to higher ranks, while others were given pension increases.¹⁸

Further, the Yemen government has tried to open a dialogue with the Southern Movement by establishing the "Committee for the Southern Issue" as part of the preparation to activate the "Committee for National Dialogue." It was reported that some sections of the Southern Movement responded positively to the government move.¹⁹ On the other hand, the government announced the establishment of popular committees to support its policy under the name of "The National Committees for the Defense of Unity" in each southern governorate. The objective of this move was to mobilize the people in South Yemen to counter the opposition's influence and to engage with the supporters of the opposition to promote government policy.²⁰

The government has tried to show its concern about the situation in the south in other ways too. It has asked the southern governorates and local councils to provide a list of their demands so that discussions can be held. Indeed, a major part of the demands of the people of the south seem to focus on the demands for "equality" with the north in the distribution of the government posts and for a fair share of national development projects. In fact, a good part of these demands are economic or financial in nature,²¹ such as:

- Higher share of income from oil production

14 Elaph (Saudi Arabia) January, 23 2010, and Elaph (Yemen), October 13, 2009.

15 Al-Riyadh Newspaper Saudi Arabia, December 23, 2009.

16 Al-Hayat, October 1, 2009, and Elaph (Yemen), October 13, 2009.

17 Elaph (Yemen) February 16, 2010.

18 <http://www.mayonews.net/ad/showdetails.php?id=7717>

19 Elaph (Yemen), January 26, 2010.

20 Al Sharq al Awsat, May 5, 2009.

21 Interviews with political activists and local authorities in Sana'a and Shabwah in April 2010.

in the southern region to be directed to regional development

- Providing employment in oil companies for people from the southern governorates
- Equal distribution of land and return of land confiscated from the south after the war in 1994
- Demand to enact some regulations that prevent North Yemeni businessmen with capital from monopolizing private sector investment in South Yemen
- Offer employment opportunities for educated and trained South Yemenis in the government sector
- Improve basic infrastructure in the southern governorates, in particular the water, electricity, health and education sectors (including building of schools, training centers, universities and hospitals).

More recently, in early 2010, the government announced a number of infrastructure projects which would generate employment. In April 2010, President Saleh traveled to Hadramaut and announced 163 projects at a cost of about 32 billion Yemeni riyals.²²

Most Yemenis find it difficult to believe that the government's attempts will solve the problem and they are skeptical that the demands of local councils – and the government announced projects – will be implemented or change things on the ground. Often, the security forces have taken a tough stance on the Southern Movement. In fact, the government has been accused of repeatedly blocking phone providers and internet forums to make it more difficult for protesters to communicate and organize protest demonstrations, and security forces have imprisoned journalists, university professors

and southern separatist leaders such as Hasan Ba'aum and his son, Fadi Hasan Ba'aum, and Nasser al-Nuba, besides others.

The government has also tried to co-opt members of the Southern Movement in an attempt to either trigger a split or neutralize certain groups. Efforts were also made to exert pressure on the movement's leaders through local governors or the pro-government local tribal leadership. For example, some of the leaders have come under pressure to head or be part of the special committees established by the government to deal with the demands of the Southern Movement such as the "Committee to solve the problem of the South Yemen ex-army officers" or the "Committee to Settle the Issue of Land Ownership".

Long Term Strategy to Solve the Problems in the South

The conflict in South Yemen has political and socio-economic roots. In fact, many of the South Yemenis are not necessarily interested in separation; instead, they demand economic and financial improvement of their situation, political reform, greater transparency, and an end to corruption. However, the government lacks a long term strategy to deal effectively with the problem.

There is general agreement that Yemen's challenges – especially economic problems – cannot be solved by the government on its own. Regional contribution is necessary to improve the conditions inside the country. Yemen and the GCC are strategic partners in the Gulf, and being neighbors, the Gulf States should have a direct interest in the security and stability of Yemen. Cooperation between the GCC and Yemen should focus on two levels:

22 <http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2010/4/551977.html>

The first level should include investment in projects inside Yemen that offer large-scale employment at the local level, while the second should focus on imparting skills training to Yemeni workers.

One of the major problems facing Yemen is the huge unemployment. Development and investment programs should focus on projects which can be directly implemented at the local level. For example, the UAE government offered the Yemeni government a Dh2.385 billion (US\$650 million) grant to finance sustainable socio-economic development projects. This will support 14 projects in different regions of Yemen including basic infrastructure development projects in transport, energy, water, sewage, healthcare, and education, as well as cultural and social development projects. The Abu Dhabi fund will supervise 12 of the 14 projects directly in cooperation with the local governorates which channel money to local offices and will not go through the Yemen central government. The UAE supervisory board will be in full control of the projects right from the process of bidding for the contracts until the final implementation and will employ only Yemeni recruits to create employment.²³

The GCC states and Yemen need to establish a training system in order to enhance the skills of Yemeni workers so that they can be productively employed in the GCC countries. Currently, discussions are underway between Yemen and some GCC states regarding a project to recruit, train and employ Yemenis in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.²⁴ This is an important step as it would counter the traditional complaint of the GCC that Yemenis are not qualified for employment in their labor markets. Once trained

and qualified, these Yemenis can be employed not only in Saudi Arabia or Qatar but can also take on responsibilities in Saudi and other GCC development projects in Yemen. Similar training projects could be initiated with other states of the GCC such as the UAE.

However, there are clear limits to what the GCC states can or wish to do particularly with regard to the repeated demand for political and economic reform and transparency in Yemen. While the Arab and GCC states can provide the platform for discussions and focus on economic cooperation and financial assistance, it is only the international community, the US and the European Union (EU) in particular, that might be able to convince the current government to initiate political reforms. However, the EU and the US seem to have a rather hesitant attitude towards the situation in South Yemen. The EU voiced concern about the incidents of political violence in South Yemen and asked all parties to renounce violence. While the EU called upon all the parties to engage in dialogue in order to identify issues of concern and take urgent action to address legitimate grievances, it lacks a strategy to translate the call into action.²⁵

In mid 2009, the US tried to clarify its view of the problems in the South. In a statement issued by the US Embassy in Sana'a, the US stated that "political violence should not be the way to settle the problem." Emphasizing that "equality and participation in political, economic, and social activities, according to the law, and among all citizens must be the true guarantee to maintain the unity of Yemen" and that "legitimate grievances need to be addressed," the statement called for a national dialogue among all parties concerned to solve the problems. The US statement avoided

23 <http://www.adfd.ae/media/adfdnews/Lists/ADFD%20News/DispForm.aspx?ID=33>

24 Interview in Sana'a, April 6, 2010. For cooperation with Qatar, see <http://www.silatech.com>

25 <http://www.alsahwa-yemen.net> (May 16, 2009).

criticism of any party and tried to show US neutrality in the conflict between the government and the opposition by calling for reform and a negotiated settlement.²⁶

Conclusion

In mapping the Southern Movement in Yemen since 2007 until now, we can identify three major ‘interest groups’ involved in the opposition to the central government in Sana’a.

The first is the old socialist school which includes former and active members of Yemen’s socialist parties, some of whom are members of the Yemeni Parliament. This group focuses on the aim of restoring the disbanded People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (1967-1990) and puts forward the argument that the unity move was a major mistake as their aspiration for a state based on equality and power sharing between the north and the south has never been realized.

The second group is mainly driven by the feeling that they have been victims of the government’s ‘discrimination policy’ against the people of the south which has made them ‘second-class citizens.’ Their demands have mostly focused on the improvement of the social and economic conditions in the south. Initially, their demands had hardly any political dimension. To this group belong the retired former Southern army officers, who, in 2007, publicly demanded higher pensions and reinstatement in the Yemeni army. Also in this group are some of the southern youth who enlisted in the “Union of the Southern Youth,” which initially focused on securing the right of the youth in the south for better employment opportunities, education, and qualification to make them employable and competitive in the job market. Over the years, these groups

developed a more political agenda and became an active part of the Southern Movement.

The third group includes the South Yemenis who are mainly motivated by the demands for family and tribal rights, which include demands for control over land, property ownership, and political influence for family or tribe within the state structure. The best example of this group is Sheikh Tariq al-Fadhli and his “Council for Leading Peaceful Revolution”. This group, initially at least, was established to protect the leader’s personal, family and tribal interests by putting pressure on the government for what he considers “his” rightful demand for control over land. Later this group began raising the political demand for the separation of South Yemen.

At this stage, the Southern Movement faces weaknesses on two levels: The first is the conflict within each ‘interest group’ on the issues of leadership, political objectives and the code of conduct. The second is the conflict between each interest group within the Southern Movement – they may be united by their enmity to the central government, but differ widely on many issues like ideology, political agenda, future relations with the central government and actual attitude towards the objective of separation.

To these must be added other weakening factors which are undermining the influence of the movement like the fact that it currently lacks crucial outside assistance and political and financial support. All these factors contribute to limiting the ability of the Southern Movement and make it more difficult for it to pose a grave challenge to the government at the present stage.

There is no doubt, however, that the Southern Movement has the potential to develop into

a major challenge to the legitimacy of the government and the stability of the country, and eventually, to the integrity of the state in the future. If the government proves to be unable or unwilling to undertake serious political and economic reform measures to deal with the problems facing the entire country, and the south in particular, and fails to address the social, economic and political grievances or recognize the need to restructure the political system of Yemen, the security and political situation could deteriorate beyond control with dire implications for the regional security of the Gulf States.