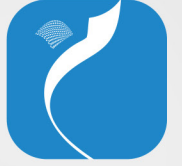


Analytic Papers
April 2024

المركز
لدراسات الاستراتيجية
MOKHA
for strategic studies



Presidential Leadership Council: Challenges Ahead, Two Years In

FOREIGN STUDIES UNIT

WWW.MOKHACENTER.ORG

[✉ INFO@MOKHACENTER.ORG](mailto:INFO@MOKHACENTER.ORG)

[f](#) [t](#) [v](#) [w](#) @MOKHACENTER



Presidential Leadership Council: Challenges Ahead, Two Years In

Analytic Papers

April - 2024



We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

Abstract

April 7, 2024, marked the second anniversary of the establishment of the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), it signifies a milestone in the realm of legitimate authority. This formation stands out as one of the most notable transformations since its reconstruction following military intervention by the Arab Coalition, led by the Arab Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, under the auspices of the United Nations in March 2015.

Despite its generally modest and possibly disappointing performance, the PLC has shown varying effectiveness over the past two years in addressing key tasks and issues. This has been amidst a backdrop of complex challenges, including the regional dynamics marked by the de-escalation between Iran and Gulf states, as well as the emergence of regional conflicts sparked by Israeli aggression in Gaza. Meanwhile, domestically, there has been a state of stagnation and wavering between war and peace, with the conflict with the Houthi group transitioning into a resource-driven economic and monetary war alongside ongoing military confrontations, albeit at a reduced pace. This occurs against the backdrop of repercussions from the regional conflicts, particularly stemming from the Israeli aggression on Gaza.

This analysis delves into the status of the PLC two years after its establishment, examining its prominent challenges, notably those related to the events in the Red Sea region.

Complex Files

Over the past two years, the PLC has dealt with several intricate matters, posing significant challenges. Foremost among these is navigating the relationship dynamics among its components and addressing heightened economic challenges. These challenges have intensified because of the Houthi group's ability, supported by Iran, to obstruct oil exports, coupled with a decrease in support from the Arab Coalition countries. However, the council's stance on peace negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi group has been crucial, as has its capacity to create a cohesive vision to tackle potential peace terms and other pertinent issues.

The Relationship Between its Components:

The harmony among the eight members of the council and the entities they represent posed the most significant challenge for the leadership council. Despite the initial display of unity upon its formation, this harmony was short-lived, giving way to contradictions among its members. Following their return to Aden, several council members faced harassment from security personnel affiliated with the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), compelling them to depart the temporary capital for alternative destinations. Tariq Saleh moved to Mokha, while Sheikh Sultan Al-Arada spent periods in Riyadh before returning to Ma'rib on August 25, 2023. Faraj Al-Bahsani shuttled between Riyadh, Mukalla and other capitals amidst the turmoil in his relationship with the council. Abdullah Al-Alimi and Othman Majali spent most of the two years in Riyadh, with the latter openly criticizing the council's governance and its ties with allies.

The most prominent development in this aspect was the joining of two members of the PLC to the Southern Transitional Council. On Monday, May 9, 2023, Aidaroos Al-Zubaidi issued a decision in his capacity as PLC, appointing his two colleagues to the PLC, Abdul Rahman Al-Muharami and Faraj Al-Bahsani, who also were his deputies in the leadership of the STC, after it held the “consultative meeting” in Aden, and, at its conclusion, the participants signed what was called the Southern National Charter.

The relationship among the factions supporting the command council suffered a significant setback on August 7, 2022, due to clashes in Shabwa Governorate between groups aligned with the transitional council against units of the National Army and security forces. These clashes culminated in the seizure of the capital city, Ataq, and most of its districts, by the transitional council-affiliated formations, while National Army units retreated to the outskirts of the governorate. This conflict arose from the transitional council’s efforts to assert control over the eastern governorates and promote its separatist agenda. Engaging in military campaigns independently from the command council, it sought to establish control over Abyan Governorate under the pretext of counterterrorism.

The command council attempted to move into Hadhramaut Governorate following the Shabwa battle, but it encountered opposition from Saudi Arabia plus other social and political groups. In response, various entities emerged, including the Hadhramaut National Council, the Shabwa National Council and the Unified Council of the Eastern Provinces, forming a collective resistance.

Saudi Arabia applied pressure to restrain the Transitional Council and supported forming the National Shield forces, deploying them in Aden and Hadhramaut governorates. In 2023, the eastern governorates became a battleground for intense polarization between the Transitional Council and local political and social entities, with underlying competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The conflict in Shabwa resulted in a profound and lasting division among the factions supporting the PLC. The Yemeni Islah Party issued a statement indicating the possibility of reassessing its involvement across various domains. One of the consequences of the Shabwa conflict was the persistent tension and the assassination of a prominent preacher, Abdullah Al-Bani, on Eid day in Ataq. Al-Bani was reportedly killed by forces associated with the Shabwa Defense Forces, which are aligned with the governor of Awad bin Al-Wazir Governorate.

Unification of the Military Institution:

The primary task of the PLC was to integrate the military units of the entities under its umbrella, with the Ministries of Defense and Interior leading this effort. This integration was the primary rationale behind the PLC formation. In late May 2022, the council agreed to establish a military and security committee comprising 59 members, with Major General Haitham Qasim Taher appointed as its head. The committee's mandate was to restructure the armed and security forces per Article 5 of the Declaration of the Transfer of Power issued on April 7, 2022. This declaration transferred power from President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi and his deputy, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, to the PLC. However, the merger process is not complete yet.

According to the chairman of the PLC, the committee has thus far agreed to just fight the Houthi militia and restore state authority as a shared goal, where they formed a joint operations room overseeing a single theater of operations under the Ministry of Defense's command, based in Aden, the temporary capital, as efforts were made to reactivate and allocate military institutes and colleges to train members of the National Army and other formations.

The PLC has come a long way in integrating the intelligence services. On January 4, 2024, the leadership council's president issued a presidential decree establishing the Central Apparatus for State Security. According to this decree, the Political Security, National Security Bureau and various other intelligence entities — associated with the transitional council, the Republican Guards and Giant Forces — were all united as one intelligence bureau, named the Central Apparatus for State Security. All those intelligence agencies had to undergo an integration process that must be finalized within six months of the decree's issuance.

However, this decision was not without controversy. As part of its implementation, a prominent leader of the transitional council, Major General Shalal Ali Shaye, had to be appeased. From that, a new agency was formed and named the Counter-Terrorism Service, with Major General Shalal Ali Shaye appointed leader. This decision drew criticism due to Shaye's previous involvement in human rights violations during his tenure as the director of Aden's security.

According to the head of the PLC, the inability to successfully integrate military formations stems from the reluctance of certain military leaders who fear that the integration process will result in their forces being removed from the control of specific entities, notably the Transitional Council.

The failure to integrate these military formations under the Ministries of Defense and Interior represents a significant aspect of the PLC's performance shortcomings. Plus, that failure presents a strategic threat to any progress made by the council and increases the likelihood of future armed conflicts among its components. It is well understood that the proliferation of weapons often starts new cycles of conflict, and Yemen's history over the past five decades offers ample evidence of this.

Peace Negotiations:

Over the last two years, discussions and negotiations between Saudi Arabia and the Houthi group have progressed from secrecy to public forums. Both sides have engaged in visits by security and political delegations aimed at resolving the conflict. However, the Presidential Leadership Council has not been directly involved in these negotiations. While some sources point to the council's complete absence, others suggest occasional updates to be provided by the Saudi leadership to the council's president, alongside meetings between the Saudi Minister of Defense, Prince Khalid bin Salman, and council members when necessary to seek approval on specific aspects of the peace map derived from Saudi-Houthi negotiations.

Then, the council — in an awkward position — looked as if it were reliant on Saudi Arabia for negotiations while seeming to be disconnected from the process. This dependence raised concerns about the council’s autonomy. The International Crisis Group emphasized in a report that excluding the PLC from negotiations wouldn’t facilitate an end to the war. This situation also allowed the Houthi group to launch media campaigns against the council, accusing it of submissiveness and questioning its independence. They repeatedly stated their refusal to negotiate with the council directly, preferring to engage with the party supporting the Houthis.

As Saudi Arabia moved forward with formulating a road map for peace in Yemen, the PLC faced the challenge of developing a cohesive political vision for potential negotiations with the Houthis. This task was daunting due to significant differences of opinion among its members regarding the country’s future. The “Consultation and Reconciliation Commission,” as it related to the council, took responsibility for forging a unified vision. On March 7, 2023, they successfully endorsed the “General Framework for the Political Vision for the Comprehensive Peace Process” document. Leadership council member Faraj Al-Bahsani said their delegation was prepared to start negotiating with the Houthis. However, the negotiation process exacerbated tensions and revealed disagreements within the council and its supporting factions, where the transitional council consistently advocated for the inclusion of the southern issue in the negotiations and demanded a dedicated negotiating team for their representation.

Economic Challenges:

For the past two years, the Presidential Command Council encountered significant economic hardships, posing a serious challenge. The resources available to the legitimate authority dwindled considerably. In October 2022, the Houthis launched attacks on the oil export ports in Shabwa and Hadhramaut, successfully halting the government's oil exports. This blockade deprived the government of over a billion dollars in annual oil revenues, which can account for approximately 70% of the state's total resources.

The ceasefire, established with the formation of the PLC, marked a shift in the conflict with the Houthis toward an "economic resources war." Alongside obstructing oil exports, the relaxation of import restrictions at the Houthi-controlled port of Hodeida drained the legitimate government of crucial income sources. This action resulted in a substantial loss of tax and customs revenues — redirecting them to benefit the Houthi faction — therefore, economic challenges intensified, polarizing the legitimate government's financial situation while bolstering the Houthis' position. This decline in resources coincided with a significant surge in foreign exchange rates, reaching 1,669 Yemeni riyals per dollar by mid-April 2024, and in the prices of goods and services, which turned people's lives into an unbearable living hardship.

Ensuring electricity service in areas under the legitimate government's control, particularly in Aden, demanded substantial financial resources, totaling around \$3 million monthly.

However, this provision drained the government's resources, especially amidst allegations of corruption and poor administrative practices.

The two "coalition" nations failed to meet the amount of economic assistance they initially pledged upon the council's establishment. Despite Riyadh's and Abu Dhabi's announcement to provide \$3 billion in support, they seemed reluctant to satisfy said commitment. This reluctance further aggravated the economic crisis in areas under the legitimate authority's control. Riyadh provided only \$1.2 billion, disbursing the funds in installments. The legitimate authority received the first installment, totaling \$267 million, in August 2023, followed by another installment of \$250 million in February 2024. The Yemeni government often allocates these funds to cover salaries, wages and electricity expenses.

The economic crisis has triggered several consequences, one of which is the increasing public discontent with the policies of the leadership council and its government while significantly diminishing their legitimacy. Also, the economic crisis has compelled the transitional council to scale back its overreach and to recognize the role of the council and the government in addressing the issue.

Red Sea Attacks:

Tensions have heightened in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region since last October (2023). The Houthis have attacked numerous commercial and military vessels, prompting retaliatory strikes from the United States and Britain on military targets in various cities and regions controlled by the Houthi group, where clashes in the Red Sea have intensified due to recent developments involving Iran and Israel.

These attacks have cast multiple shadows on the PLC. For one, the attacks prompted a shift in the international stance regarding the Yemen conflict, drawing attention to the dangers of escalating Houthi influence and the potential harm to regional security as well as foreign interests. There has been increased international support for the legitimate government and the PLC. As the Houthi attacks persisted, a notable change occurred, evident in Security Council Resolution 2722, which unanimously reaffirmed Resolution 2216, issued in 2015. This resolution served as the foundation for the legitimacy of the Arab Coalition military intervention. The resolution also called on countries to bolster support for Yemeni Coast Guard forces. The chairman of the PLC viewed this development as a positive step toward enhancing the military capabilities of the legitimate government.

The ongoing attacks and heightened tensions in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have fostered relative cohesion among the members of the command council and its supporting factions. This unity stems from the escalating risks posed by these developments and the opportunities they present to garner support from the international community.

One of the most significant impacts of these attacks has been the stalling of the political settlement process. Yemeni parties were close to signing a peace agreement, drafted by Saudi Arabia, based on its negotiations with the Houthis (as mentioned in the “Complex Files” section). However, due to pressure from the United States, Saudi Arabia was compelled to postpone signing the agreement.

It appears that the recent conflict between Iran and Israel has diverted the path to peace in Yemen, increasing the likelihood of a return to war, due to the various parties' unwillingness to compromise. In light of this, international envoy Hans Grundberg urged the Yemeni parties not to exploit the current situation as an opportunity to backtrack on commitments made in late 2023, which formed the foundation for a peace roadmap for Yemen.

On the other hand, the attacks in the Red Sea relieved some of the popular pressure on the Houthis. The two-year truce had placed the Houthis at odds with popular demands, notably paying government employees' salaries. However, the attacks shifted focus from these demands. With the opening of the port of Hodeida, the Houthis experienced a boost in financial revenues and increased income from customs and taxes on imported goods. As dissatisfaction grew among the populace, collectively evolving into a movement demanding salary payments, the Red Sea attacks gave the Houthis new excuses to ignore their obligations. They even diverted attention by invoking the defense of the Palestinian cause, leveraging its significant presence in the consciousness and sentiments of Yemenis.

The Red Sea attacks also furnished the Houthis with a fresh pretext for militarily mobilizing segments of society and Yemeni youth, ostensibly to participate in the Gaza conflict. Amidst what seemed to be disillusionment among Arab and Islamic nations toward Gaza and the Palestinian people, the Houthis' standing surged in both domestic and international popular circles.

The leadership council, along with most Yemenis, is deeply concerned about the Houthis' growing popularity. This shows their great capacity to recruit and mobilize numerous young individuals, raising the risk of their involvement in new conflicts. Consequently, there's an elevated possibility of Yemen sliding back into a cycle of war, potentially more violent than previous ones, given the Houthis' attachment to religious sanctities.

These attacks doubled economic challenges in regions under the legitimate government's control and those across Yemen, leading to a significant increase in insurance fees by five or six times, and shipping fees increasing by eight times, at Yemeni ports. Those cost escalations directly impacted the prices of goods and services, as they also increased the risk of potential famine in the country. The food supply chains' vulnerability to tangible risks could push Yemen near to famine, particularly given the already-existing food insecurity and the region's susceptibility to uncertain and dangerous paths.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

To Members of the Presidential Leadership Council:

There is a good opportunity here to garner support from the international community, which could help shift the military balance within the country. This is particularly significant among international actors' increasing acknowledgment that relying solely upon political measures to resolve the Yemeni conflict was a failure. However, the lack of confidence in the legitimate authority's ability to achieve this military transformation, by way of internal contradictions and conflicting messages, has made international parties cautious.

The leadership council must seize this opportunity, establish a clear vision, demonstrate a unified stance and implement concrete actions. Among the most crucial steps is advancing the integration of military units under the command of the Ministries of Defense and Interior.

To the International Community:

Despite the acknowledged weaknesses of the Presidential Command Council, directing resources toward it represents the most direct and reliable path to attaining lasting stability in Yemen, ensuring regional security and safeguarding international interests. Since the command council is directly influenced by the two coalition countries (Saudi Arabia and UAE), international stakeholders must persuade these countries to enhance the council's cohesion and efficacy.

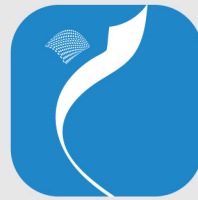
Reference

1. He created an executive body and an advisory council that includes 400 members... Al-Zubaidi appoints Al-Bahsani and Al-Muharrami as his deputies to head the Transitional Council, Al-Masdar Online, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/273823>
2. The events of Shabwa and the restoration of the path of popular resistance, Al-Mokha Center for Strategic Studies, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/skzcx>
3. Read the Islah statement on the events of Shabwa... (Discussion space for “Al-Sahwa Net” on Twitter), Al-Sahwa Net, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://alsahwa-yemen.net/p-58267>
4. The Islah Party demands community alignment in Shabwa against the crime of liquidating Sheikh Abdullah Al-Bani, Al-Mahria, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://almahriah.net/local/27749>
5. The Presidential Command Council in Yemen announces the formation of a joint military and security committee to restructure the army and police forces, Al Jazeera Net, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/zvdjb>
6. The Chairman of the Leadership Council renews commitment to the peace option and confirms readiness for any other options, Yemeni News Agency Saba (affiliated with the legitimate government), on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://www.sabanew.net/story/ar/109225>
7. Decision of the Chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council to establish the Central Agency for State Security, Yemeni News Agency “Saba”, Sabant website, at the link: <https://www.sabanew.net/story/ar/105160>
8. Decision of the Chairman of the Presidential Command Council to establish the Counter-Terrorism Service, Yemeni News Agency Saba, on 4/21/2024, available at the following link:
9. <https://www.sabanew.net/story/ar/10516>

10. The Chairman of the Leadership Council renews commitment to the peace option and confirms readiness for any other options, op. cit.
11. The Troubled Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council, International Crisis Group, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/g0kxw>
12. The Leadership Council confirmed the appointment of a delegation to negotiate with the Houthis.. Al-Bahsani to Asharq Al-Awsat: Saudi Arabia is making extraordinary efforts to support peace in Yemen, Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/la2c90>
13. See: The War for Economic Resources in Yemen: Context and Risks, Al-Mokha Center for Strategic Studies, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/f3klo>
14. Saudi Arabia welcomes Hadi's decision to transfer his powers to the Presidential Command Council in Yemen, Al Arabiya Net, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/vlprj>
15. Saudi Arabia welcomes Hadi's decision to transfer his powers to the Presidential Command Council in Yemen, Al Arabiya Net, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/vlprj>
16. The Kingdom provides economic support worth \$1.2 billion to the sister Republic of Yemen, Saudi News Agency (SPA), on: 1/8/2023, available at the following link: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/c5b49e96f0q>
17. Challenges to developing public revenue sources in Yemen, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, December 2023.
18. The Kingdom deposits the second batch of support to address the budget deficit of the Yemeni government, amounting to 250 million US dollars, Saudi News Agency (SPA), on: 2/11/2024, available at the following link: <https://www.spa.gov.sa/N2045451>

19. For more details, you can refer to the Mokha Center's annual report (Yemen 2023), which will be released soon.
20. See: The Security Council adopts a resolution condemning Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea, UN News, at the following link: <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2024/01/1127557>
21. For more details, you can refer to the Mokha Center's annual report (Yemen 2023), which will be released soon.
22. See: The Security Council adopts a resolution condemning Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea, UN News, at the following link: <https://news.un.org/ar/story/2024/01/1127557>
23. The Chairman of the Leadership Council renews commitment to the peace option and confirms readiness for any other options, op. cit.
24. The UN envoy calls on the Yemeni parties not to exploit the current situation as an opportunity to abandon the road map, Al-Masdar Online, on: 4/21/2024, available at the following link: <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/293256>
25. The previous reference.

المخا
للداسات الاستراتيجية
MOKHA
for strategic studies



WWW.MOKHACENTER.ORG

✉ INFO@MOKHACENTER.ORG

f t y t @MOKHACENTER

