



Amid a History Burdened with Conflicts: **How Can Violence Be Curbed in Abyan?**

Field report



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Field Studies Unit

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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

Executive Summary

Abyan Governorate holds significant importance due to its strategic geographical position. It is centrally located among the southern governorates, serving as the gateway to the city of Aden and a key connection to Shabwah, Hadhramaut and Al-Mahrah.

Its diverse terrain and tribal composition, coupled with its political and geographical positioning, have made it a focal point of conflicts in southern Yemen since the mid-1980s.

The governorate has suffered from multiple, consecutive waves of conflict and warfare, the latest being the military campaigns led by the Southern Transitional Council (STC) since August 2022 to eliminate so-called terrorist groups. While these campaigns have achieved some gains, they have simultaneously fueled various drivers of violence within the governorate.

Reducing violence and achieving a measure of peace and stability in Abyan requires a creative integration of political, military and developmental strategies. This includes rebuilding state institutions, ensuring security, fostering economic development and promoting dialogue among key stakeholders. Additionally, substantial coordination and support from international actors, primarily the Coalition states and the United States, are crucial.

Such support should focus on addressing the dire economic and living conditions, adequately funding government institutions so they are able to reinforce state authority — including security forces, police and the judiciary — to uphold the rule of law.

Moreover, essential services for local communities must be bolstered, along with launching developmental projects aimed at improving infrastructure and creating job opportunities for the youth. It is also necessary to support military units present in Abyan before August 2022 and to recruit local residents into new military camps stationed in remote and rugged areas. Concurrently, external military formations should be gradually withdrawn from the governorate.

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Introduction

Over the past decades, Abyan Governorate has endured significant violence due to wars and cycles of conflict. These conflicts have stemmed from various factors, including political struggles during the leftist rule in South Yemen, tensions between separatist and pro-unity factions in the era of the Republic of Yemen, as well as the influence of extremist militant groups. Abyan's geographical location, demographic composition, economic and social conditions and its positioning within political and geographical rivalries — both before and after unification — have all played major roles in making it either an active party in conflicts or a battleground for them.

Currently, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) is leading a military campaign across different parts of the governorate, branding it as an effort to combat violence perpetrated by Al-Qaeda. However, a significant portion of Abyan's residents remain skeptical of the campaign's true objectives, viewing it as yet another phase of conflict driven by regional rivalries and the ongoing struggle between pro-unity and separatist factions — a battle that has repeatedly plagued Abyan.

This study explores the waves of violence that have affected Abyan, analyzing their connection to the governorate's geography, demographic structure and sociocultural characteristics. It also examines the latest STC-led military campaign, "Arrows of the East", and its impact on violence and conflict in the region. Furthermore, this study provides policymakers with strategic recommendations on how to mitigate violence and establish lasting peace and stability in Abyan.

Geographical Significance and Its Impact

Abyan Governorate is located southeast of Yemen's capital, Sana'a, approximately 427 kilometers away. It shares borders with Shabwah to the east, Aden and Lahj to the west, Shabwah and Al-Bayda to the north (including parts of Upper Yafa'), as well as the Arabian Sea to the south. The governorate's administrative capital is Zinjibar¹.

Spanning an area of approximately 16,943 km², Abyan features diverse landscapes, including mountains in its northern outskirts, plateaus in the central region and long coastal plains along its southern edge. The climate varies from mild to warm in summer and cool in winter, though the southern coastal areas experience hot summers and warm winters².

Strategically, Abyan is at the heart of Yemen's southern governorates. During British colonial rule, it was part of the Federation of South Arabia and was divided into several local entities, including the Fadhli Sultanate, the Awlaki Sultanate, Lower Yafa' Sultanate and Lower Aulaqi Sultanate. The Dathina Region was unique in that it did not operate under a sultanate or sheikhdom; instead, it had a tribal council resembling a parliament. This council consisted of tribal leaders from such key clans as Al-Maysar, Sal Hasana, Al-Alahi and parts of Al-Balil.

After independence, Abyan became part of the People's Democratic Republic³ of Yemen (South Yemen), which later evolved into the Democratic Republic of Yemen. Following the unification of Yemen, Abyan became an official governorate within the Republic of Yemen.

1. See: Abyan, National Information Center - Presidency of the Republic, on: 8/21/2024 AD, available at the following link: <https://yemen-nic.info/contents/Brief/detail.php?ID=7612>

2. See: Al Jazeera Net, on: 12/17/2014, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/28p2r>

3. Interview with a political figure from Abyan Governorate.

Today, Abyan is divided into 11 districts, including: Zinjibar (the governorate's capital), Khanfar (the largest, in terms of area and population), Lawdar, Mudiyah, Al-Wade'a, Jeeshan, Al-Mahfad, Ahwar, plus three districts in the Yafa' mountains: Sarār, Sabih and Rassad (with Rassad being the largest of the Yafa' districts).

Abyan's geography has played a significant role in fueling cycles of violence, and it continues to do so today. Several key factors highlight how its location and terrain contribute to ongoing conflicts:⁴

1. Abyan overlooks the southern coast of Yemen, making it a vital area along the Arabian Sea. Its proximity to major international maritime routes also exposes it to smuggling activities. As a result, competing factions are seeking control these coastal entry points, viewing them as strategic assets for trade, security and illicit operations.
2. Abyan borders Aden, the temporary capital of Yemen's internationally recognized government and the stronghold of the STC. This close geographical connection makes Abyan a battleground for influence between the government and the STC, as each side strives to expand its control and secure positions near Aden.

The governorate's diverse topography includes mountain ranges and deep valleys, which provide natural hideouts for armed groups, like Al-Qaeda. The rugged landscape makes it easier for militants to evade security forces, complicating military operations and law enforcement efforts. This terrain advantage also means that regaining control over volatile areas is often a prolonged and difficult task.

4. Interviews with a number of figures from Abyan Governorate.

Abyan lies along the main highway connecting Aden with the eastern governorates of Shabwah, Hadhramaut and Al-Mahrah. This route is a critical artery for trade and military movements, making Abyan a strategic target for competing factions eager to secure control over supply lines and communication networks.

3. Abyan also serves as a transit hub between northern and southern Yemen, making it a focal point for forces seeking dominance over the country as a whole — whether it be the Yemeni government, the STC or the Houthis. This geographic positioning ensures that Abyan remains at the center of political and military struggles, as various factions vie for influence over the broader Yemeni landscape.

Demographics of Abyan

Abyan Governorate is home to approximately 619,000 people, making up 2% of Yemen's total population of 31.89 million, according to 2021 population projections⁵. The population is unevenly distributed across the governorate's districts, with the highest concentrations in agricultural and fishing areas, as people tend to settle where economic opportunities are more readily available⁶.

Compared to the surrounding governorates, Abyan has a higher population density, with a predominantly tribal social structure. Like many areas in Yemen, Abyan has long been a hotspot for tribal and regional tensions, which have often escalated into local conflicts. These tensions have been exploited by various warring factions, leading to the recruitment of individuals into armed groups⁷.

5. Annual Statistical Book for the years 2021 and 2022, Central Statistical Organization: pp. 51-58.

6. See: Abyan, National Information Center, previous reference.

7. Interview with a social figure from Abyan Governorate.

Unlike neighboring governorates, Abyan has a lower rate of migration abroad, and fewer residents are engaged in commerce. Instead, a large portion of the population serves in the military, earning low wages. This has contributed to widespread poverty, making the local population more vulnerable to recruitment by conflict-driven groups, including armed factions and militias that offer salaries in foreign currency.

Culturally, Abyan's population is deeply religious. Historically, its people were less receptive to socialist ideologies compared to other parts of Yemen and were more aligned with conservative intellectual and religious influences from neighboring Arab countries⁸. As a result, Abyan's society was more adaptable to the post-unification system, unlike some regions where socialist ideas had taken deeper root⁹.

The combination of religiosity, poverty and high unemployment has created a fertile ground for extremist groups to recruit young men. This has been facilitated by religious narratives, including the well-known hadith:

“From Aden and Abyan, 12,000 will emerge to support God and His Messenger; they will be the best among those between me and them.”¹⁰

This belief played a role in the emergence of the Aden-Abyan Army in the mid-1990s. This group surfaced in 1997, openly declaring allegiance to Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. They established a stronghold in Jabal Hattat, and some of their foreign fighters were involved in the kidnapping of 16 tourists on December 28, 1998.

8. Interview with Adel Al-Hasani, via an audio-only call application, on August 22, 2024.

9. Interview with a political figure from Abyan.

10. On the authority of Abdullah bin Abbas, narrated by Al-Tabari, Abu Ya'la and others.

The rescue attempt by Yemeni government forces resulted in the deaths of four hostages and one of the kidnappers. The group was also linked to the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Aden's port, which killed 17 American sailors¹¹.

Economic Conditions in Abyan

Abyan's diverse landscape has shaped the livelihoods of its people, with agriculture and fishing serving as the backbone of the local economy. Farming thrives in valleys between the mountains in the north, across the central plateau and along the southern coastal plains, which stretch for more than 270 kilometers (about 168 miles). The region is irrigated by several key wadis (valleys), most notably Wadi Bana and Wadi Hassan, which form the Abyan Delta¹² — a historically fertile area. Meanwhile, fishing is a primary occupation for those living along the coast.

Before independence¹³, cotton farming was the most significant economic activity, making Abyan a major agricultural hub. The governorate once housed a cotton gin and the renowned Al-Kawd Agricultural Research Center, reflecting its historical importance in Yemen's agrarian economy. Today, Abyan holds untapped potential for investment in agriculture and fisheries, while its central highlands — stretching across Mudiyah, Lawdar, Al-Wadea and Al-Mahfad — are believed to contain valuable mineral resources¹⁴, though these remain largely unexplored.

11. Aden Abyan Army, Al-Jazeera Net, on: 12/29/2014, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/m043bv>

12. See: Abyan, National Information Center, previous reference.

13. Interview with a political figure from Abyan Governorate.

14. Ibid.

Abyan has experienced significant climate shifts that have severely impacted agriculture and livestock farming. As a coastal lowland region, it is particularly vulnerable to climate change, which has disrupted its role as a key food-producing area in Yemen.

Over the past decades, recurring droughts have taken a toll on the region's farmland, leading to a sharp decline in crop yields. Many farmers have been forced to abandon agriculture altogether, as their harvests were no longer meeting their families' basic needs. This economic decline has been exacerbated by the absence of government policies to support struggling farmers or develop sustainable agricultural solutions.

As a result, Abyan — a once-thriving agricultural heartland — now faces a deteriorating economy, with shrinking opportunities for its residents. Without strategic interventions, the continued impact of climate change, economic neglect and resource mismanagement will only serve to deepen poverty and bring more instability in the governorate¹⁵.

Abyan Governorate faces high poverty levels due to a combination of structural challenges, climate change and ongoing conflicts. According to the 2014 Household Budget Survey, nearly 48.6% of the population lives in poverty¹⁶. This figure has likely doubled during the current years of war due to declining economic conditions and the collapse of the national currency, with more than two-thirds of the population now falling below the poverty line.

15. The impact of climate change and armed conflicts on the agricultural sector in Abyan Governorate, Dr. Hekmat Aboud, Mokha Center for Strategic Studies, August 2024, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/wgtlq>

16. Abyan, Local Governance in Yemen (Studies and References Platform), available at the following link: <https://yemenlg.org/ar/governorates/%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86/>

The governorate also suffers from a high rate of unemployment, especially among its youth, who make up over 75% of the population. The unemployment rate is expected to exceed 60% of the workforce. Like many other regions, Abyan has a relatively high proportion of young people compared to other age groups.

There is a direct connection between Abyan's economic and social conditions and the rise in violence. Poverty, unemployment and lack of services create an environment ripe for increased violence and recruitment into extremist groups and armed militias. Meanwhile, political and tribal conflicts contribute to the ongoing cycle of instability in the region¹⁷.

Waves of Conflict

Over the past five decades, Abyan Governorate has endured repeated cycles of violence, perhaps more than any other governorate in Yemen. The region has frequently found itself caught in confrontations, serving as both a battleground for broader conflicts and a victim of the actions of violent and extremist groups.

Below, we highlight some of the most significant periods of violence Abyan has experienced since its independence:

Regional Conflict

After the leftist movement took control of southern Yemen following independence on November 30, 1967, the country became embroiled in internal divisions and ideological shifts, which led to repeated cycles of violent conflict. Beginning in the 1970s, particularly after the coup against President Salim Rubaya Ali, these internal tensions escalated into a regional conflict.

17. Interview with a political figure from Abyan Governorate.

The Yemeni Socialist Party, founded in 1978, had split into two competing factions. One faction, primarily composed of Abyan and Shabwah, aligned with former President Ali Nasser Mohammed and was referred to as the “Gang” wing. The second faction, in the center of Lahj Governorate, including some regions, like Radfan, Yafa’ and Al-Dhale’, was led by Ali Antar, Saleh Musleh and Abdul Fattah Ismail and also known as the “Gang” wing. Meanwhile, Aden and Hadhramaut remained more neutral, following whichever side ultimately emerged victorious in the conflict¹⁸.

The regional division deepened, culminating in the bloody events of January 13, 1986, which resulted in the deaths of nearly 12,000 people, the imprisonment of thousands, as well as the displacement of over 150,000 individuals, most of whom fled north. This mass exodus was led by Ali Nasser Mohammed and many others from Abyan Governorate¹⁹.

After the victory of the Lahj faction, leadership of the state was taken over by the people of Al-Dhale’ Governorate. Most of the leaders within the security and military apparatuses, as well as political figures from the Yemeni Socialist Party, hailed from Al-Dhale’ and areas of Yafa’ and Radfan, collectively known today as the “Triangle” region. The formal presence of Ali Salem al-Beidh, the Secretary-General of the Yemeni Socialist Party, from Hadhramaut Governorate, added to this power structure. While this conflict persisted after Yemeni unity, it did so indirectly, resurfacing prominently during the 1994 war between the so-called unity partners: the General People’s Congress and the Yemeni Socialist Party. The Ali Nasser Mohammed faction, alongside the people of Abyan, supported the legitimate government, led by President Ali Abdullah Saleh at the time.

18. Interview with a political figure from Abyan.

19. Interview with a personality from Abyan Governorate.

The people of Dhale', Yafa' and Radfan accuse the people of Abyan of aiding the northerners during the 1994 war, which they describe as an "invasion of the south". However, this claim is disputed, as the actual position of Abyan was largely driven by a desire for revenge, stemming from the events of 1986²⁰, rather than any allegiance to the north.

The regional conflict persisted throughout the rule of former president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, who hails from Abyan Governorate and was a military leader during the 1994 war, fighting alongside the legitimate government. During his presidency, he was often criticized for being constrained by regional divisions, and his governance of the southern governorates was seen as heavily influenced by these historical geographical conflicts. As a result, many from the southern governorates did not perceive Hadi as the legitimate president but rather as a key figure in the long-standing regional rivalry.

Tensions over regional rivalries escalated once again following the launch of the "Decisive Storm" military operation and President Hadi's return to Aden in 2016. His relationship with factions of the Southern Movement, particularly those from Al-Dhale' Governorate, remained strained. This period also saw increasing friction between President Hadi and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a key member of the "Arab Coalition" that supported legitimacy. The UAE, for reasons that remain unclear, sought to weaken Hadi's authority and provided considerable support to his historical adversaries. This support enabled these factions to establish military formations in Aden and other southern and eastern governorates.

20. Interview with a personality from Abyan Governorate.

The UAE backed the formation of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), announced on May 11, 2017, which was primarily led by factions from Al-Dhale' Governorate, with some support from Yafa' and Radfan (the Triangle areas), along with a Salafi faction, led by Hani bin Brek.

The STC has deployed its military formations in Aden, escalating its actions against the legitimate government and engaging in multiple rounds of fighting, including the battles in Aden in January 2018, another round in August 2019 and then the Shabwah clashes in August 2022. In the same year, the STC launched "Operation Arrows of the East" toward Abyan province. While the STC claims the operation targets what it describes as "terrorism", some residents of Abyan view it as part of a regional power struggle, where people from Al-Dhale', Radfan and Yafa' seek to assert control over Abyan. They believe that unless they achieve full military dominance over the province, it will remain a source of concern and a threat to their separatist project²¹.

According to a leading figure from Abyan, the conflict between the people of his province and those from Al-Dhale', Radfan and Yafa' has deepened, shifting from an elite-level dispute to a broader societal struggle. People from Abyan have rallied around their political elites, while the same has happened among those from the so-called Triangle regions. This divide is now evident across various government institutions — both civilian and military — as well as in the private sector. There are noticeable restrictions on the business interests of Abyan-based entrepreneurs, particularly those aligned with Abyan elites, such as Ahmed al-Eisi.

21. Interview with a personality from Abyan Governorate.

One major example is the ongoing battle concerning the aviation license renewal for Queen Balqis Airlines, which is owned by Al-Eisi²².

Al-Qaeda Wars

Al-Qaeda first appeared in Abyan province in the early 1990s under the name “Aden-Abyan Army”, as previously mentioned. Following an attack on a military medical convoy on June 21, 2003, clashes erupted in Jabal Hattat, where security forces surrounded the militants and arrested some of their leaders. On May 5, 1999, the judiciary sentenced two to death, including the army’s leader, Abu Bakr Al-Muhdar. The death sentences were carried out in Abyan in October 1999²³.

As a result, a general perception emerged that Abyan was Al-Qaeda’s primary stronghold in Yemen. Since the group’s emergence, clashes between it and the military and security forces have been ongoing. Around the year 2000, U.S. forces also became involved in this conflict under the banner, “War on Terror”, launching continuous attacks on Abyan and neighboring provinces. These operations led to several horrific massacres, including the Al-Majalah massacre, in which many innocent civilians were killed. On December 17, 2009, U.S. naval forces attacked the village of Al-Majalah in the Al-Mahfad district with five Tomahawk missiles armed with cluster munitions, killing 41 civilians, including 9 women and 21 children, in a Bedouin camp. Later, remnants of these cluster munitions caused additional casualties, killing four more civilians and injuring 13 others²⁴.

22. Interview with a leading figure from Abyan Governorate

23. Aden-Abyan Army, Al Jazeera Net, previous reference.

24. Between the Drone and Al-Qaeda.. Civilians Pay the Price of US Targeted Killings in Yemen, Human Rights Watch, on: 10/21/2013, available at the following link: <https://www.hrw.org/ar/report/2013/10/21/256487>

Al-Qaeda took advantage of the turmoil in Yemen during the 2011 protests against former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. In March of that year, the group seized control of several cities in Abyan province, including Ja'ar. By May, it had taken over Zinjibar, the province's administrative capital, and later turned a football stadium outside Zinjibar into a temporary military base for its fighters²⁵.

While some argue that Abyan has historically been a stronghold for Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups due to economic and social conditions, others — including sources interviewed on the matter — dispute this claim. They argue that Abyan is no different from other provinces where individuals affiliated with extremist groups exist and accuse other parties of deliberately linking Abyan to terrorism for political gains²⁶.

Former President Ali Abdullah Saleh frequently exploited the “terrorism” issue during his political conflict with the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), who opposed his governance and demanded reforms. Whenever he faced political pressure, Saleh would reopen the “terrorism file” in Abyan as a means to evade the political obligations of fixing the country's deteriorating conditions.

This became even more evident under the immense pressure generated by the widespread protests in Yemen in 2011. In an attempt to escape these pressures and create chaos to alarm international and regional actors, Saleh deliberately allowed Abyan to fall into the hands of Al-Qaeda, especially as he perceived the political and military leaders from Abyan as a threat to his regime.

25. Interview with a political figure from Abyan Governorate.

26. Ibid.

After Hadi was elected as a consensus president in 2012, the “terrorism file” in Abyan remained wide open. Rival political forces used it to weaken Hadi’s authority and undermine the transitional phase.

Overall, a segment of Abyan’s elite believes that the presence of Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in the province is more political than real — an attempt by certain actors to falsely associate Abyan with terrorism. They argue that these extremist groups exist in Abyan no more than in other provinces.

As evidence, they point to how Abyan’s tribal communities quickly formed local resistance committees to fight Al-Qaeda, preventing the group from taking full control of the province. These committees arose after security and military forces abandoned their posts — likely under orders from Saleh’s regime. The resistance fought against Al-Qaeda’s control of Abyan for nearly three years (2010–2013), during which security forces remained largely absent. These popular resistance forces played a crucial role in preventing Al-Qaeda from fully seizing the province and ultimately thwarting its plans. As a result, Al-Qaeda elements shifted eastward, taking control of the city of Mukalla, instead²⁷.

In mid-2012, the Yemeni army and local resistance forces launched a major offensive against Al-Qaeda and extremist groups in Abyan. The large-scale attack began on May 12, aiming to retake areas under the group’s control. After more than a month of fierce battles, government and resistance forces recaptured Zinjibar and Ja’ar on June 12 and the city of Shuqrah on June 15, forcing Al-Qaeda militants to retreat to Shabwah province.

27. Ibid.

By August 2012, the popular resistance committees had significantly contributed to expelling Al-Qaeda from Abyan. Their efforts were widely recognized both officially and by the public, as they had fought intense battles against the group. As a result, the leaders of these resistance committees became prime targets for Al-Qaeda. At its peak, the resistance force numbered around 8,000 fighters, effectively serving as a defensive shield for the cities against Al-Qaeda's expansion²⁸.

In early December 2015, Al-Qaeda once again seized control of Zinjibar and Ja'ar, taking advantage of the government's preoccupation with fighting the Houthis, who had overthrown the state's authority. This plunged Abyan into yet another painful cycle of violence, worsening the suffering and hardship of its people. As a result, the National Army, backed by local resistance forces, had to engage in new battles against Al-Qaeda. After fierce fighting, government forces successfully recaptured Zinjibar on August 14, 2016.

Houthi Wars

In 2015, Abyan witnessed intense battles between Houthi forces and loyalists of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh on one side, and, on the other side, the National Army forces loyal to President Hadi and local resistance forces were battling it out. When Houthi militias advanced toward Abyan, the military units stationed in the province took divided stances — the 115th Infantry Brigade in Lawdar sided with the Houthis, while the 111th Infantry Brigade in Ahwar remained loyal to the legitimate government under Hadi²⁹.

28. Popular resistance, from defeating Al-Qaeda to repelling the Houthis (translated from Arabic), Al Arabiya Net, on: 4/6/2015, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/u0vej>

29. Decisive Storm. The 111th Brigade announces its support for legitimacy in Yemen, Al Arabiya Net, on: 4/1/2015, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/47z0q>

On March 27, the Houthis seized control of the city of Shuqrah, on the Arabian Sea, but they faced resistance from Hadi's loyalist forces and Al-Qaeda, which opposed both the Houthis and Hadi's government. At this point, the Arab Coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, began launching air strikes to disrupt the Houthi advance toward Aden³⁰. During these battles, the Houthis took control of Zinjibar on March 29, engaging in fierce clashes with local tribes over a military base and a football stadium in the city. On April 3, Houthi militias entered Ja'ar, Lawdar and Shuqrah, while the 111th Infantry Brigade attempted to cut off their supply lines as they amassed forces toward Aden.

However, the situation shifted after the Battle of Aden's Liberation. On August 8, 2015, resistance forces backed by the National Army (under Hadi's leadership) launched an offensive to liberate Abyan. Just two days later, on August 10, the army and local resistance recaptured Zinjibar, the 115th Infantry Brigade's headquarters, and other cities in the province³¹.

Despite these losses, the Houthis continue to exert influence in Abyan, maintaining a presence on its borders with Al-Bayda province. UAE-backed Yemeni media accuse the Houthis of fueling violence in Abyan, claiming they are recruiting sleeper cells and even supporting Al-Qaeda to escalate attacks against Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces³²

30. Houthis control the Yemeni city of Shaqra, Masrawy, on: 3/27/2015, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/i6ann>

31. Launching the operation to liberate Abyan and fighting in northern Sana'a, Deutsche Welle, on: 8/8/2015, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/3z2cb>

32. From Abyan Gate, a hidden Houthi war to strike southern Yemen, Al-Ain News, on: 8/12/2024, available at the following link: <https://al-ain.com/article/yemen-hothi-war-south>

The Houthis also exploited the case of Faisal bin Rajab for political gain. Bin Rajab, a pro-government military commander, was captured by the Houthis during their march toward Aden. Despite being among the leaders listed in UN Resolution 2216, which mandates their release, he remained in captivity for years.

In March 2023, under UN mediation, the warring parties agreed to exchange 2,223 prisoners, including former Defense Minister Mahmoud al-Subaihi and Nasser Mansour Hadi (the brother of President Hadi). However, Faisal bin Rajab was not included in the deal, sparking outrage in Abyan. In response, Abyan's tribes formed a delegation and traveled to Sana'a to negotiate directly with the Houthi leader, ultimately securing his release. The government viewed this as a deliberate ploy to enhance the Houthis' image and drive a wedge between their opponents³³.

The Houthis also sought to exploit the Ali Ash'al case and appointed Ahmed al-Rahwi — an Abyan native — as the prime minister of their unrecognized government in Sana'a. Sources accuse the Houthis of manipulating Abyan's historical grievances about marginalization to gain sympathizers in the south, particularly in Abyan, due to its strategic political, military, and geographical significance — as it has historically been the balancing force of southern Yemen and, by extension, the country as a whole³⁴.

33. Who is the “General of the Six Wars”, who was released by the Houthi militias?, Independent Arabia, on: 4/30/2023, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/5kik3>

34. From Abyan Gate, a hidden Houthi war to strike southern Yemen, Al-Ain News, on: 8/12/2024, available at the following link: <https://al-ain.com/article/yemen-houthi-war-south>

Clashes Between the Legitimate Government and Southern Transitional Council (STC)

Following the liberation of Aden in mid-2015, the legitimate government returned to the city. However, UAE pressure seemingly forced then-President Hadi to appoint leaders from the Southern Movement (mostly from Al-Dhale') to key positions in Aden's local government and security apparatus. As a result, Naif al-Bakri was dismissed, and Aidarous al-Zubaidi was appointed as governor of Aden, while Shalal Shaye'a was named security chief. At the same time, the UAE oversaw the formation of several military factions but refused to integrate them into the legitimate government's command structure.

With Emirati backing, tensions escalated between the Southern Movement factions (mainly from Al-Dhale', Yafa' and Radfan) and the legitimate government under Hadi. These groups gradually tightened their grip on Aden, culminating in a direct confrontation when Hadi's plane was prevented from landing at Aden's airport³⁵.

On April 27, 2017, Hadi dismissed al-Zubaidi as governor of Aden and also removed Hani bin Brek from his ministerial position. In response, the Southern Movement organized a mass protest, during which al-Zubaidi was authorized to establish a new entity to represent the "Southern Cause". This led to the official announcement of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) on May 11, 2017, from Abu Dhabi, UAE.

From that point forward, the conflict between the STC and the legitimate government intensified, ultimately forcing the government to relocate to Riyadh, where it continued to operate.

35. Aden Airport Crisis: A Chapter in the Conflict between Hadi and the Emirates, Adel al-Ahmadi, Al-Araby al-Jadeed, February 13, 2017, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/1nim6x>

Abyan became a central battleground in this political and military struggle, with most of its population siding with Hadi against the STC-aligned forces, which were largely composed of fighters from Al-Dhale', Yafa' and Radfan. This tension revived old rivalries, reminiscent of the infamous January 13, 1986, civil war in the south. During the First Battle (January 2018), STC-aligned forces gained the upper hand over government troops. However, intervention from the Saudi-led coalition halted the fighting and restored a fragile status quo. In the Second Battle (August 2019), STC forces captured Aden and large parts of Abyan, pushing further toward Shabwah in an attempt to consolidate power³⁶.

When negotiations between Shabwah's local authorities and STC-backed forces failed, full-scale fighting erupted³⁷. Eventually, the National Army regained control of Shabwah, then advanced into Abyan and prepared to recapture Aden. Government troops gathered at Al-Alam checkpoint on Aden's southern outskirts, but before they could launch their final assault, UAE air strikes targeted them, killing and wounding hundreds of soldiers. This forced the government forces to retreat to Shuqrah in Abyan, where they established a defensive line against the STC³⁸.

With the battle lines drawn near Shuqrah, intermittent clashes continued until the Riyadh Agreement was signed in November 2019. Under the agreement's military provisions, both sides agreed to withdraw troops, with the process overseen by Saudi military committees stationed along the frontlines near Zinjibar (Abyan's capital).

36. Yemeni government: We will take all legal measures after the UAE targeted our army, Anadolu Agency, 9/1/2019, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/sjn8t>

37. The Transitional Council in Yemen begins a military operation to control Abyan, Independent Arabia, on: 8/23/2022, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/yztkz>

38. After Shabwa — How did the Transitional Council forces control new areas in southern Yemen?, Al Jazeera Net, on: 8/27/2022, available at the following link: <https://2u.pw/nJlCVuQc>

To implement the agreement:

- The 89th Infantry Brigade (National Army) withdrew from the Qarn al-Kalasi mountains (west of Shuqrah) to Lawdar, where it was repositioned in Jabal Yasuf to prepare for battles against Houthi forces in Mukayras.
- The STC's 14th Commando Brigade pulled back from Sheikh Salem (east of Zinjibar) to Al-Dhale', with further withdrawals planned.

Despite these de-escalation efforts, Abyan remained a contested province. The STC fully seized control of the region in 2022 without resistance, marking another chapter in Abyan's long history of conflict.

Wars of Eastern Arrows

The STC's control of Shabwah province, located to the north of Abyan, in early August 2022, sparked its ambitions to take control of the remaining southern provinces and push forward its secessionist project. On August 23, 2022, the STC's president, Aidros Al-Zubaidi, ordered his military formations to launch a military operation to capture the entirety of Abyan province under the guise of fighting "terrorist" organizations.

At that time, the STC's military forces and the government forces shared control of the province. Government troops held the districts of Shuqrah, Lawdar, Al-Mahfad, Mudiyah and Al-Wadi'a, which made up the largest part of the province. The remaining areas were controlled by the STC forces. It seems that the government forces chose not to engage in conflict with the STC forces, and an agreement was reached between both sides.

According to the agreement, the STC forces would take control of the entire province without resistance, while the government forces would enter the provincial capital, Zinjibar, with Major General Abu Mishal Al-Kazemi continuing his role as the director of security in the province³⁹.

Sources suggest that Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) President Dr. Rashad Al-Alimi issued a notice to STC President Aidros Al-Zubaidi, who is also a member of the Council, urging a halt to military operations until the re-deployment of forces in the liberated areas, as stipulated in the 2019 Riyadh Agreement⁴⁰. However, Al-Zubaidi continued to push for military campaigns without regard to this notice.

The declared objectives of the campaign were marked by confusion and lack of clarity. Sources close to the STC indicated that the operation's goal was to end the division in Abyan province, enhance its security, as well as bolster the security of Aden and other southern provinces against "terrorist acts" and eliminate the threat of supporting or enhancing any insurgency or "terrorist operations" in the southern provinces. The sources stated that the operation was intended to implement the remaining provisions of the 2019 Riyadh Agreement⁴¹. In contrast, other statements suggested that the operation's objective was to "remove the threat of supporting any insurgency or potential terrorist activities in the southern provinces by the Brotherhood, end the division in Abyan, and eliminate the threat of cooperation between the Brotherhood and the Houthis with Al-Qaeda"⁴².

39. The same previous reference.

40. The Transitional Council in Yemen begins a military operation to control Abyan, Independent Arabia, previous reference.

41. The same reference.

42. Abyan cleanses itself of terrorism. "Arrows" against Al-Qaeda, Al-Houthi and the Brotherhood, Al-Ain News, on: 8/23/2022, available at the following link: <https://al-ain.com/article/abyan-terrorism-al-qaeda-al-houthi-brotherhood>

The operation was carried out in four phases. The first phase targeted the coastal city of Shuqrah, one of the largest cities in Abyan, east of Aden, as well as the districts of Khobar and Ahwar. The second phase moved toward the central districts of the region, while the third phase focused on the Oweimran Valley. In the fourth phase, the operation headed toward the Mahfad district, located at the far eastern part of Abyan, bordering Shabwah province.

The STC's "Security Belt" forces in Abyan, as well as other armed southern forces affiliated with the STC, were subjected to several attacks, resulting in casualties, including the death of Major General Abdul Latif Al-Sayyid, the commander of the Security Belt forces in Abyan, who was killed along with several of his companions in a bombing targeting his convoy in the Oweimran area on August 10, 2023⁴³.

According to the Governor of Abyan, Major General Abu Bakr Hussein, the campaign succeeded in bridging the gap and uniting the different military forces and formations in the province. It led to the capture of camps belonging to "terrorist organizations", as he described them, starting from the Khobar Al-Maraqsha area and reaching the Oweimran camp, the largest camp of Al-Qaeda and its main leadership headquarters⁴⁴.

43. The assassination of the commander of the Security Belt Forces in Abyan in an explosion in southern Yemen, Al-Jazeera Net, on: 8/10/2023, available at the following link: <https://n9.cl/ujvux>

44. Yemen. The beginning of the fourth phase of the "Arrows of the East" operation in Abyan, Erem website, on: 9/24/2022, available at the following link: <https://www.eremnews.com/news/2405925>

Despite the significant role the campaign could play in confronting violent groups and damaging their capabilities, it may not achieve its declared objectives. Moreover, it may harm the stability of Abyan for the following reasons:

1. The campaign does not represent state institutions, nor is it managed by the Presidential Leadership Council or the Ministry of Defense. It is instead carried out by the STC, which represents a political and regional faction historically at odds with the province and has ambitions to control it, along with other southern and eastern provinces.
2. The declared objectives of the campaign lack credibility. A large segment of Abyan's population views the "war on terrorism" as merely a cover, with the real goal being to achieve political gains by asserting control over the province, as it represents an obstacle to the STC's project of imposing separation. Naturally, the lack of credibility in the campaign's objectives undermines the trust of local residents, making them less cooperative with the operations.
3. The forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) are accused of committing violations against the tribes and residents of Abyan, including arbitrary arrests and repression. These actions generate feelings of anger and resentment among the locals, and such violations could escalate local tensions, increasing opposition to the STC's campaigns. However, this does not necessarily mean support for any other party⁴⁵.

45. Interview with a figure from Abyan Governorate.

4. This situation has created a deep rift between the people of Abyan and these forces. The people believe that the actions of these forces have deviated from their declared goal of fighting “terrorist groups”, and voices have been raised calling for these forces to leave Abyan. Recent tribal statements and declarations, particularly regarding the case of the kidnapped Ali Abdullah Ashal, included demands for the forces aligned with “Eastern Swords” to leave and be replaced by forces from the province itself. The idea here is that the people of Abyan are not opposed to addressing the issue of “terrorist groups”, but the continued presence of outside forces to fight these groups — groups that the people of Abyan have been at the forefront of fighting — has been rejected by the community. There are calls for the forces to be made up of local residents and a refusal to let Abyan continue to be branded with this accusation⁴⁶.

5. To be focused solely on the military aspect, coupled with the lack of a comprehensive strategy that also addresses political, economic and social dimensions, including awareness campaigns, has proven ineffective. Previous experiences in the province have shown that military campaigns lacking integrated strategies have only fueled chaos rather than instilling stability, leading to counterproductive results in achieving security. The head of security in the province, Brigadier General Abu Mishal Al-Kazmi, highlighted this, stating: “Previous military campaigns against terrorist organizations succeeded, but once they stopped, Al-Qaeda regrouped⁴⁷”.

6. The multiple loyalties of the military and security units participating in the campaign, as well as the various entities issuing orders and directives, do not provide conditions for the success of the campaign. This creates security gaps that violent groups can exploit.

46. Ibid.

47. Yemen. Beginning of the fourth phase of Operation Arrows of the East in Abyan, Erem website, previous reference.

The Ashal Al-Jadani Case

On June 12, 2024, Lieutenant Colonel Ali Ashal Al-Jadani, a battalion commander in the air defense forces from Abyan Governorate, was abducted by unknown gunmen in the Al-Taqniyah area of Aden and was taken to an unknown location. The Abyan tribes organized three protests demanding information about his fate and the fate of other forcibly disappeared individuals. The two demonstrations held in Aden were met with repression by the Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces, while the third protest took place in Zinjibar, the capital of Abyan Governorate. After all attempts by the tribes of Abyan to communicate with the government authorities in Aden failed and after their inability to receive any response regarding the case, the Al-Jadani tribe — of which Ashal belongs — repeatedly blocked the international road connecting Aden and Shabwah Governorates⁴⁸.

The case of Lieutenant Colonel Ashal cast a shadow over the security situation in Aden and Abyan, triggering escalating protests, security tensions and tribal confrontations, ranging from clashes to road blockages and kidnappings, especially with the delays in the investigations and the lack of transparency in the efforts to uncover Ashal's fate⁴⁹. It also exacerbated regional sensitivities and polarization, providing certain factions in Abyan with a rallying point to mobilize against the Southern Transitional Council.

48. Abyan tribes block international road again to demand disclosure of the fate of Colonel Ashal Al-Jaadani, Al-Masdar Online, on: 9/15/2024, available at the following link: <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/302176>

49. Ashal and the “Foxy” gang. A mysterious puzzle that has been searching for an answer for five months in Aden's institutions!, Al-Masdar Online, on: 11/16/2024, available at the following link: <https://almasdaronline.com/articles/305851>

The latest report from the United Nations Expert Team described the abduction case as a “serious security incident”, noting that it “resulted in an internal crisis that affected the status of the Southern Transitional Council in the south and led to riots in Aden and Abyan”. The report further stated that, “although many suspects have been arrested, the case remains unresolved, and the main suspect has not been apprehended yet”. On July 9, 2024⁵⁰, the High Security Committee, chaired by Minister of Defense Mohsen Mohammed Al-Daari, decided to suspend Yusra Al-Maqtari, the head of counterterrorism operations in Aden, and referred her for investigation⁵¹.

Recommendations for Decision-Makers

Achieving peace and stability in Abyan Governorate requires a creative integration of political, military and developmental approaches, with a focus on rebuilding state institutions, providing protection and ensuring economic development for the citizens. The solution must be comprehensive, relying on dialogue among key actors, and supported by significant coordination and assistance from international stakeholders, especially the Arab Coalition countries and the United States. This must be reflected in practical actions to eliminate sources of tension, combat terrorism and extremism, as well as disarm various militias.

- Economic and social conditions play a significant role in fueling violence in Abyan, so solutions should target these underlying issues, rather than just experiencing the symptoms, such as violence motivated by religious beliefs or social conditions. Without improving income levels and creating job opportunities, violence in the governorate cannot be eradicated.

50. Ibid.

51. The Supreme Security Committee discusses the circumstances and developments of the kidnapping of Colonel Ali Ashal and takes a number of measures, reported the official Yemeni News Agency (Saba), on: 7/9/2024, available at the following link: <https://www.sabanew.net/story/ar/113881>

- Adequate support should be provided to government institutions responsible for maintaining state authority, including security forces, police and the judiciary, to ensure the rule of law and prevent armed groups from filling the vacuum left by the institutions' absence. A strong and independent institutional presence will significantly reduce chaos and violence.
- Coordination between national and international efforts is crucial to support basic services for the local population, such as healthcare, education, water and electricity. Improving living conditions will reduce armed groups' exploitation of poverty and unemployment so they would be able to recruit young people.
- A social reconciliation program in Abyan, as well as in other regions suffering from violence, involving tribes and local communities, could contribute to reducing internal tensions and preventing armed groups from exploiting social gaps.
- The international community should support the Yemeni government in launching development projects in Abyan that aim to improve infrastructure and create job opportunities for young people. Economic development will decrease the likelihood of young people joining armed groups and provide them with a better future. Investment in education and vocational training will contribute to rebuilding the community and offer young people alternative opportunities other than joining armed conflicts.
- Support should be provided for military units present in Abyan before 2022, and recruitment should be opened for local residents to form new military units. These units should be deployed in remote and rugged areas of the governorate, which are often areas of violent group activity.

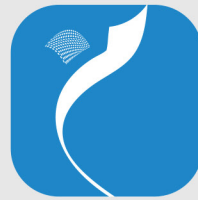
Meanwhile, gradually withdraw the military formations of the STC, which include individuals from outside the governorate, as their presence gives Al-Qaeda reasons to rally and weakens the support and backing of the local community.

- Efforts to combat “terrorism” require a government policy based on the constitution and law, coordinated with the Arab Coalition and neighboring countries, to ensure the elimination of funding and armament sources for extremist groups, as well as security cooperation to combat violent groups and rebellion, ensuring that no errors are made, and violence against innocent civilians is avoided.

- Launch awareness campaigns among the local population about the dangers of joining armed groups and engaging in violence, encouraging them to participate in civil and peaceful activities. Promote a national discourse that strengthens the inclusive Yemeni identity, fosters unity in the social fabric and provides significant stability in the governorate, in contrast to the rise of regional and tribal affiliations that trap Abyan in a cycle of violence.

Change the governor of Abyan and appoint a competent, effective figure who is accepted by the majority of the people of the governorate.

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