



Separatist Gains in Southern Yemen Raise Concern Over the Potential of Heightened Fragmentation and Regional Tensions

The military gains made as a result of a recent offensive in Yemen launched by the separatist and UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) have raised concerns regarding the potential of heightened fragmentation of the Yemeni state and regional tensions. The STC has seized a vast amount of Yemen's territory, including the country's resource-rich large southeastern governorates of Hadhramaut and Al-Mahra, strategic oil fields, military installations, and areas near the Omani border – amounting to most of southern Yemen. The gains have left the STC in control over approximately 80% of Yemen's oil reserves and critical infrastructure like the PetroMasila oil fields, and in doing so, deprived the country's internationally recognized government of many of its primary revenue sources. The military offensive has marginalized the Saudi-backed internationally recognized government, with the STC seeking to form a temporary administrative body to manage the south, further entrenching the push for de facto independence and the country's fragmented governance structure.

Experts have described the ongoing situation in Yemen as one defined by deep institutional fragmentation and an absence of a unified state system. The country is governed among several competing factions, each exercising varying degrees of control over different regions. The internationally recognized government claims sovereignty over all of Yemen but operates primarily from the interim government seat of Aden with officials often residing in Saudi Arabia due to Houthi control of the Yemeni capital city of Sanaa. The Houthis also control most of northern Yemen and significant portions of the northwestern region and Red Sea coastline – governing many of the areas with the majority of the country's population. Now, with the most recent developments, the STC – which is nominally part of the executive body of the internationally recognized government but advocates for an independent South Yemen – has consolidated its military control as well by seizing the aforementioned areas in southern and eastern Yemen, leading to increased friction with the internationally recognized government and regional powers like Saudi Arabia.

The STC's military advances have shed light on the struggle between regional actors Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over influence in Yemen. The UAE-backed STC's gains directly challenge Saudi interests and its support of Yemen's internationally recognized government. As such, Saudi Arabia has rejected the "fait accompli" created in Hadhramaut and

amassed tens of thousands of forces on the border – vowing airstrikes if the STC does not withdraw. The STC’s presence in nearby Al-Mahra is also viewed as a direct threat to Oman, which considers the province a vital buffer zone. Thus, both Saudi Arabia and Oman deem the rapid expansion of STC as a threat, exemplified by the recent visit of Saudi Arabia’s foreign minister to Oman earlier this week. The two nations are concerned that the STC’s drive for southern independence will lead to the permanent fragmentation of Yemen, creating unstable areas along their respective borders.

Regional analysts also fear that the Houthis may exploit the current situation to launch new offensives or secure additional resources, potentially reigniting a full-scale civil war. In fact, UN officials have warned that the recent developments in Yemen risk accelerating fragmentation and resulting in a spillover of conflict which could complicate already long-stalled peace negotiations. Furthermore, there is a concern that heightened fragmentation might create security vacuums that extremist groups could exploit as well. Perhaps most alarmingly, there is worry among rights activists that the potential of intensified conflict will exacerbate the already dire humanitarian conditions in Yemen – which is consistently viewed as one of the most severe such crises anywhere in the world. An estimated over 18 million people – nearly half of the country’s total population – are at emergency levels of food insecurity, with at least 5 million believed to be on the brink of famine.