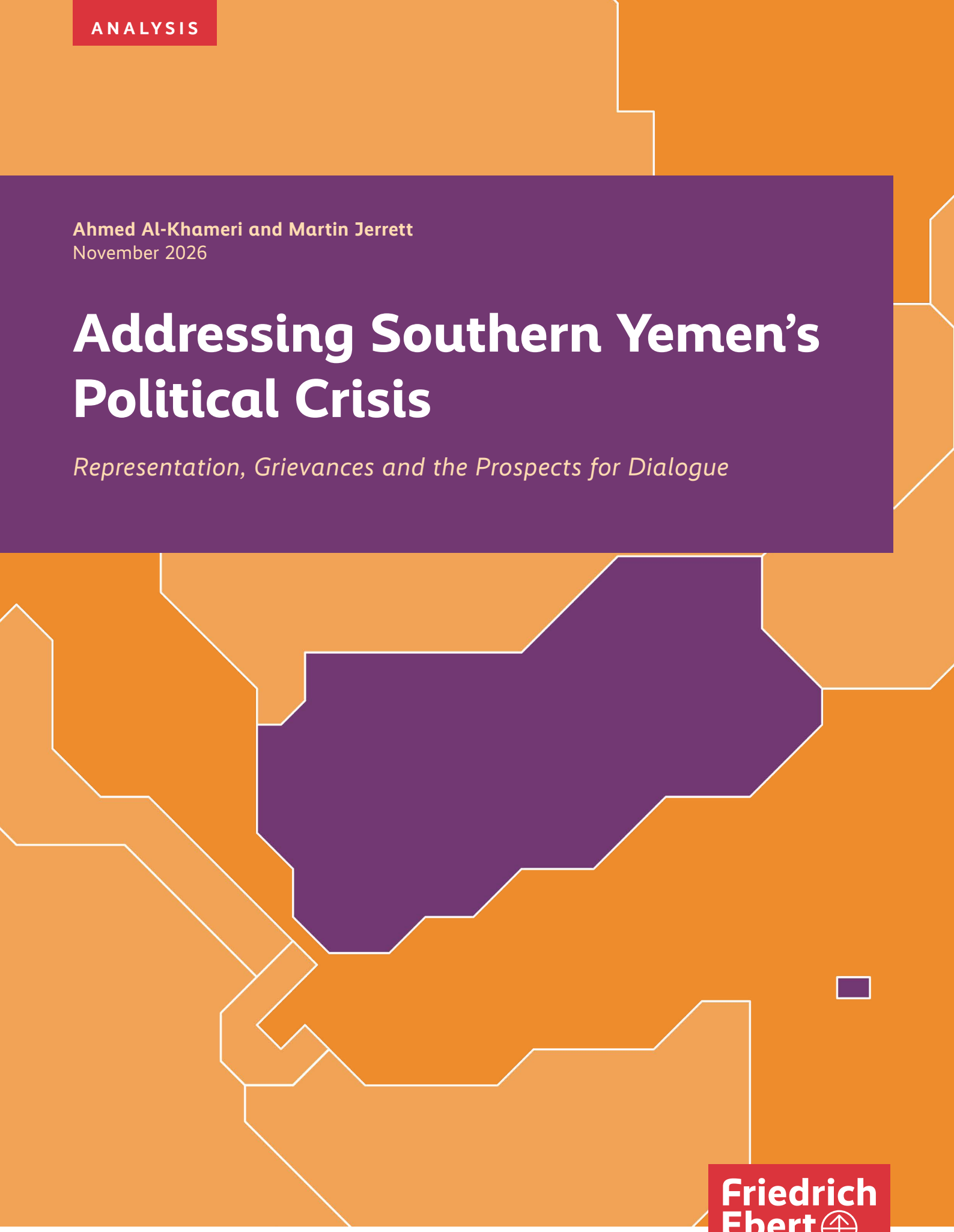
ANALYSIS

**Ahmed Al-Khameri and Martin Jerrett**
November 2026

# Addressing Southern Yemen's Political Crisis

*Representation, Grievances and the Prospects for Dialogue*



CARPO
Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

FES Office Yemen

## Imprint

**Publisher**
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
Germany
info@fes.de

**Publishing department**
FES Office Yemen, Aden, Republic of Yemen

**Responsibility for content and editing**
Dr. Marie-Christine Heinze, CARPO

**Contact**
Astrid Becker
Astrid.Becker@fes.de

**Design/Layout**
Rohtext, Bonn

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V. (FES). Commercial use of the media published by the FES is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. FES publications may not be used for election campaign purposes.

November 2026
© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.

Further publications of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung can be found here:
↗ www.fes.de/publikationen

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

**Ahmed Al-Khameri and Martin Jerrett**
November 2026

# Addressing Southern Yemen's Political Crisis

*Representation, Grievances and the Prospects for Dialogue*

# Contents

List of Maps & Tables ..... 3

Acronyms & Abbreviations ..... 3

Executive Summary ..... 4

1. The 2026 Crisis and What it Revealed ..... 5

2. The Origins of the Southern Grievances ..... 7

3. Who Speaks for the South? ..... 9

4. Prospects for a South–South Dialogue ..... 12

5. Required Policy Response ..... 14

Bibliography ..... 18

About the Project and about the Authors ..... 19

# List of Maps & Tables

Fig. 1: ↗ Map 1: Key Geographic Dynamics in Southern Yemen 2025–2026

Fig. 2: ↗ Map 2: Indicative Geography of STC Support in Southern Yemen

Tab. 1: ↗ Priorities for Southern Political Stabilisation

# Acronyms & Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| **ACLED** | Armed Conflict Location & Event Data |
| **ADM1** | First-level administrative divisions |
| **CRIMARIO** | Critical Maritime Routes (EU maritime capacity-building project) |
| **EEAS** | European External Action Service |
| **EUNAVFOR** | European Union Naval Force |
| **GCC** | Gulf Cooperation Council |
| **MASAR** | Mobilizing Area Solutions for Action and Recovery |
| **ODbL** | Open Data Commons Open Database License |
| **PLC** | Presidential Leadership Council |
| **SIERY** | Strengthening Institutional and Economic Resilience in Yemen |
| **SSR** | Security sector reform |
| **STC** | Southern Transitional Council |
| **UAE** | United Arab Emirates |
| **UNDP** | United Nations Development Programme |

# Executive Summary

The December 2025–January 2026 confrontation changed the distribution of military power in southern Yemen but did not resolve the Southern Question: the longstanding dispute over political status, representation, resources and rights following Yemen's 1990 unification and 1994 civil war. The Southern Transitional Council (STC) lost much of its institutional and territorial position, yet support for southern self-determination did not disappear. Nor did Saudi-backed military consolidation automatically confer political legitimacy on successor authorities.

The suspension of the Saudi-sponsored South–South Dialogue presents a growing stabilisation risk. While comprehensive negotiations may be impractical during the renewed military conflict with the Houthis, prolonged political disengagement could deepen southern divisions, weaken trust in Saudi Arabia and complicate cooperation among government-aligned forces. The immediate priority should therefore be to maintain limited political engagement such that emerging disputes can be managed and the conditions for resuming dialogue are preserved. Any future process must ensure credible representation, protection of peaceful dissent, meaningful participation by governorate constituencies and a clear connection to eventual nationwide peace negotiations.

A workable approach distinguishes between three tasks: resolving immediate disputes over appointments, access to institutions and verifiable entitlements; managing longer-term disagreements over political status, resources and decentralisation; and containing coercion, intimidation and unilateral changes. Security deconfliction and improvements in services are essential confidence-building measures, but they should not become substitutes for a political settlement. The durability of such arrangements will depend on developing credible political and security guarantees that reduce reliance on autonomous military power without leaving participating actors vulnerable to coercion or exclusion.

European actors should complement, not compete with, Saudi Arabia's convening role. The EU and interested member states can offer targeted support for procedural mediation, inclusive consultations, civil society monitoring, accountable public administration, verified grievance redress, and security coordination that respects rights. Funding should prioritise feasible measures that can be implemented through existing Yemeni institutions, with explicit safeguards against the entrenchment of parallel authorities.

# 1. The 2026 Crisis and What it Revealed

**Military realignment does not resolve political legitimacy.**

North and South Yemen were separate states before unification in 1990. Disputes over their integration culminated in the 1994 civil war, after which dismissals from public employment, contested land transfers and political marginalisation became enduring southern grievances. These grievances subsequently sustained a diverse movement whose demands range from institutional reform and autonomy to renewed independence.[1]

The Southern Question therefore refers to unresolved disputes over political status, representation, rights and the distribution of power and resources between Yemen's former southern state and the wider republic formed in 1990. It is not synonymous with a single demand for independence. The Southern Transitional Council (STC), established in 2017 and historically backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), became the most prominent organised advocate of southern independence, although it has never represented every southern constituency.

In December 2025, the STC launched Operation Promising Future and rapidly expanded from its established areas into eastern Yemen, seizing Hadhramawt and al-Mahra and taking control of military positions, border crossings, government facilities, and infrastructure connected to the contested PetroMasila oilfields. Although presented as a campaign against terrorism and smuggling, the operation and subsequent constitutional declaration were widely understood as an attempt to establish a new political reality across the former South. Within weeks, however, the advance was reversed. Saudi Arabia first pressed for a withdrawal and then supported a counteroffensive involving airstrikes, as well as Nation's Shield Forces, Yemen Emergency Forces and local actors (ACLED 2025; ACLED 2026). The STC's president, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, fled the country and was removed from the Presidential Leadership Council (PLC). Although an STC delegation in Riyadh announced the dissolution of their organisation, this declaration was rejected by other STC figures, and it did not extinguish the movement's popular base. Members of the delegation remain in Riyadh despite the suspension of the South–South Dialogue (Southern Transitional Council 2025).

↗ Map 1: Key Geographic Dynamics in Southern Yemen 2025–2026

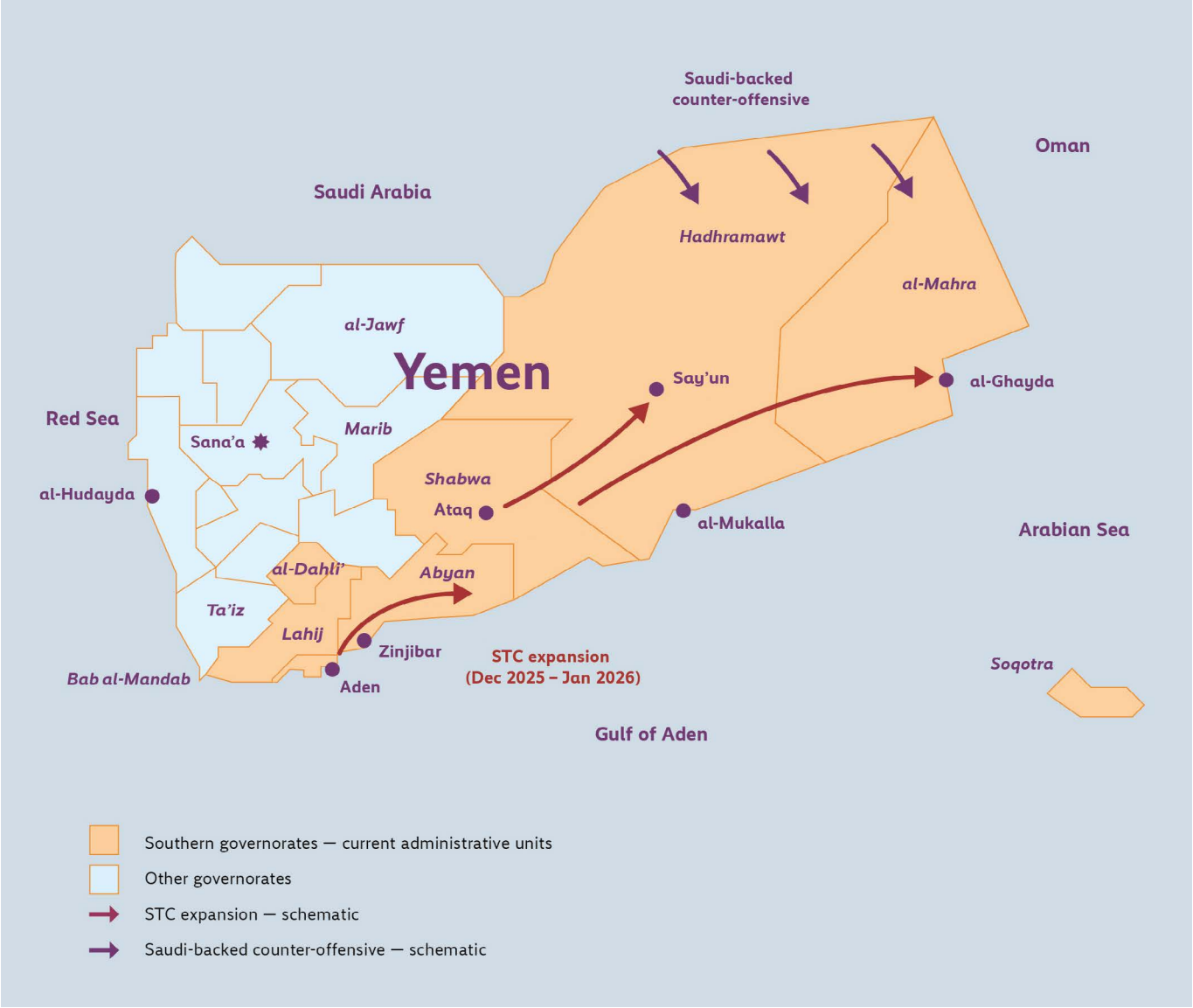
The episode cannot be adequately explained as either a sudden collapse of the STC or a proxy confrontation between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Since 2017, Emirati support had helped the STC build an effective political-military network, but battlefield gains did not create an uncontested mandate to govern the former South. At the same time, the Saudi-supported restoration of government control did not itself establish consent for the new distribution of offices, forces or revenues (confidential interview 2026a).

The contest between the STC and the PLC-led government also concerned control over revenues and the authority to negotiate future revenue-sharing arrangements. Pressure to restart oil and gas exports, the PLC's drive to centralise revenues, and movement on the economic track of the peace process raised the value of controlling production sites and the institutions administering them. Proposals to use revenues generated in predominantly southern government-held areas for nationwide salary payments had already generated political objections. Already in April 2023, STC official Amr al-Bidh had publicly opposed proposals for north–south sharing of oil revenues, merging the two central banks and using southern resources to finance salary payments as part of the emerging peace arrangements (El Yaakoubi/Alghobari 2023). These concerns reinforced fears that decisions over southern resources could precede agreement on representation or political status. The contest was therefore about who would shape the economic terms of a future peace, not simply about oil income (confidential interview 2026b).

1 This paper draws on semi-structured interviews conducted between September and October 2026 with Yemeni political figures, government officials, security actors, international diplomats, and civil society representatives. Interviews were conducted in person and remotely. All interviewees were informed of the research purpose and offered anonymity. Where interviewees requested confidentiality regarding their affiliation, only a general descriptor is used.

*Map 1: Key Geographic Dynamics in Southern Yemen 2025–2026*

Fig. 1




Source: Authors' illustration based on geoBoundaries gbOpen Yemen ADM1 administrative boundary data (2017), derived from OpenStreetMap/Wambacher, licensed under ODbL 1.0. Political and military annotations reflect the analysis presented in this paper (geoBoundaries n.d.).

The crisis also replaced one unsettled security order with another. Saudi-backed restructuring aims to improve coordination among government-aligned forces and reduce autonomous chains of command. Yet wartime security appointments and externally supported consolidation may determine the future distribution of authority before affected communities have reached an agreement as to how they should be represented (Ardemagni 2026). Furthermore, Southern citizens judge institutions not only by who holds office, but also by their ability to pay salaries, provide electricity and essential services, contain rising prices and address corruption. Protests over deteriorating living conditions in Aden and Hadhramawt illustrate how failures in service delivery can undermine public confidence in political authorities. Security gains that are not accompanied by improvements in accountable governance therefore risk leaving the grievances that sustain political mobilisation intact (World Bank 2025).

The Saudi-sponsored South–South Dialogue emerged as the political counterpart to the military reversal and in recognition of the importance of the Southern Question for Yemeni stability, but it has so far remained a preparatory process rather than a formal negotiation. With the resumption of the armed conflict, military operations and security consolidation are now taking precedence, while the dialogue remains a stated political commitment whose implementation has been deferred (confidential interview 2026c).

# 2. The Origins of the Southern Grievances

**Unresolved rights, institutional and political grievances sustain the Southern Question.**

The Southern Question comprises three related but distinct problems. The first concerns rights, freedoms and material redress for the dismissal or forced retirement of military and security personnel and civil servants following the 1994 war; contested land and property transfers; unequal access to employment and services; and restrictions on peaceful political activity. The second is a political grievance concerning the distribution of political authority, public revenues, and control over military and security institutions between Sana'a (the historical seat of the Republic of Yemen's central government) and the southern governorates. The third is a continuing competition over who can legitimately speak for the southern governorates, whose interests differ substantially. Treating all three as a binary choice between unity and independence has repeatedly obscured practical solutions.

After decades as separate states (Yemen Arab Republic = North Yemen / People's Democratic Republic of Yemen = South Yemen), North and South unified in 1990. Even before the establishment of the two republics in the 1960s, Yemen in its current borders had never been unified under one authority. When these two states were unified in 1990, the political and security institutions of the two republics were not fully integrated, and disputes between governing elites culminated in the 1994 war of secession when the South sought renewed independence from the North. The prewar *Document of Pledge and Accord* proposed decentralisation, rights protections and military reform to protect the unification process, but lacked the political trust and enforcement mechanisms required for implementation (Political Forces Dialogue Committee 1994). Following northern victory in 1994, many southern military officers and civil servants were forcibly retired, while disputed land allocations and perceptions of political and economic marginalisation under the Sana'a-centred government contributed to growing southern grievances (Human Rights Watch 2009).

The Southern Movement, or Hirak, emerged in 2007 and quickly gained prominence. Initially centred on associations of retired or dismissed personnel demanding reinstatement and entitlement, delayed redress and repression helped transform specific employment and rights claims into a wider movement for self-determination. Hirak was never a single organisation or a movement with one constitutional preference.

Successive Yemeni government administrations recognised parts of the problem. Investigations and presidential committees addressed employment and land claims; some decisions were issued, but implementation was impeded by funding gaps, institutional resistance and renewed war. Presidential Decision No. 42 of May 2023 approved measures concerning 52,766 civilian, military and security personnel dismissed or otherwise affected following the 1994 war. However, the extent to which these decisions have translated into reinstatement, payments or other entitlements remains unclear. Establishing the outstanding caseload and financing requirements should be a priority for any renewed redress mechanism.

The terms of the Implementation Mechanism to the GCC Initiative of 2011 that brought the Arab Spring in Yemen to an end required that the subsequent National Dialogue Conference include the Southern Movement and explicitly address the Southern Question – alongside constitutional reform, national reconciliation, transitional justice and local-government reform (Gulf Cooperation Council 2011: paras 20–21). A significant achievement of the National Dialogue Conference was its formal recognition of the Southern Question as a structural political problem requiring not only redress for historical grievances, but also fundamental changes to the distribution of power, resources and authority within the Yemeni state. Its outcomes proposed federalism, temporary parity for the South in leading state institutions, safeguards against forced dismissal, and measures to address inequalities in the civil service and security sector (National Dialogue Conference 2013). Yet important factions of the Southern Movement boycotted the National Dialogue Conference or disputed the legitimacy of those participating on their behalf. The subsequent decision of February 2014 for a division of the future federal state into six regions divided the former South between the Aden and Hadhramawt regions without securing broad agreement among southern political constituencies (Regions Committee 2014: 2–3; Yemen Policy Center 2022). Implementation was then overtaken by the collapse of the transition process.

The 2019 Riyadh Agreement, brokered by Saudi Arabia to end the conflict between the government and the STC and unify efforts against the Houthis, followed a narrower power-sharing logic. It recognised the STC as a principal negotiating party and linked its participation in government to arrangements for revenue administration and the reorganisation of military and security forces. The July 2020 imple-

mentation mechanism subsequently provided for a government with equal northern and southern representation, including ministers from the STC (Government of Yemen/ Southern Transitional Council 2019: Annexes I–III; Saudi Press Agency 2020). The PLC's formation in 2022 further increased southern representation to approximately half its membership. Yet these arrangements did not end southern grievances. This illustrates the difference between the numerical inclusion of southern elites and the representative inclusion of southern constituencies. Officeholding did not establish agreed rules for resource distribution, governorate-level authority, accountable security governance or the South's relationship with the state.

Survey evidence reinforces this distinction. A Yemen Polling Center survey conducted in 2019 found that approximately 46 percent of respondents in southern governorates supported separation, while attitudes towards the Southern Transitional Council and the distribution of political authority varied considerably across the South. The same survey also documented widespread dissatisfaction with economic conditions, employment, public services and human rights across Yemen. These findings illustrate how shared grievances can coexist with differing political preferences and competing claims to representation (Transfeld 2019).

Previous initiatives to address the Southern Question succeeded where they recognised specific harms, established functioning remedies or contained immediate conflict. They failed where implementation was absent, elite appointments substituted for accountable institutions, or one organisation was treated as representing a diverse South. A recurring problem has been the inability of political agreements to provide credible guarantees against the renewed use of force. For some southern constituencies, these experiences reinforced the perception that maintaining independent military capabilities offers greater protection against political marginalisation than formal agreements. Yet reliance on military power has itself repeatedly undermined negotiated arrangements, creating a cycle in which the absence of credible guarantees encourages coercive strategies that further weaken confidence in political settlements (confidential interview 2026d).

# 3. Who Speaks for the South?

**The South is not a single constituency, and armed power does not establish representation.**

The events of January 2026 redistributed military and institutional power in southern Yemen, but they did not settle the question of political representation. The STC lost territorial control, access to state institutions and much of the coercive advantage it had accumulated since 2015. Yet the beneficiaries of its defeat did not automatically inherit its political constituency. Government-aligned actors are exercising greater institutional and military authority without necessarily commanding equivalent political support, while public demonstrations and the persistence of STC-linked networks suggest that southern separatism retains an organised constituency.

## Political Influence and Coercive Power

↗ Map 2: Indicative Geography of STC Support in Southern Yemen

The STC remains the strongest organised expression of southern separatism. Its most durable social and military base lies in al-Dhali', Radfan and Yafi', while its support in Aden draws substantially from citizens who associate unity with post-1994 marginalisation. Its presence has always been less uniform in Abyan and Shabwa, stronger on parts of the Hadhrami coast than in Wadi Hadhramawt, and weakest in al-Mahra.

Its military defeat should not be confused with the disappearance of either the demand for independence or its constituency. As an anonymous Yemeni interviewee observed, no successor has yet reproduced its combination of organisation, messaging and street mobilisation. Support for independence also extends beyond the STC: some Hirak factions and independent southern figures share the objective of restoring a southern state but reject the STC's organisational dominance or perceived concentration of leadership among particular geographical networks (confidential interview 2026e).

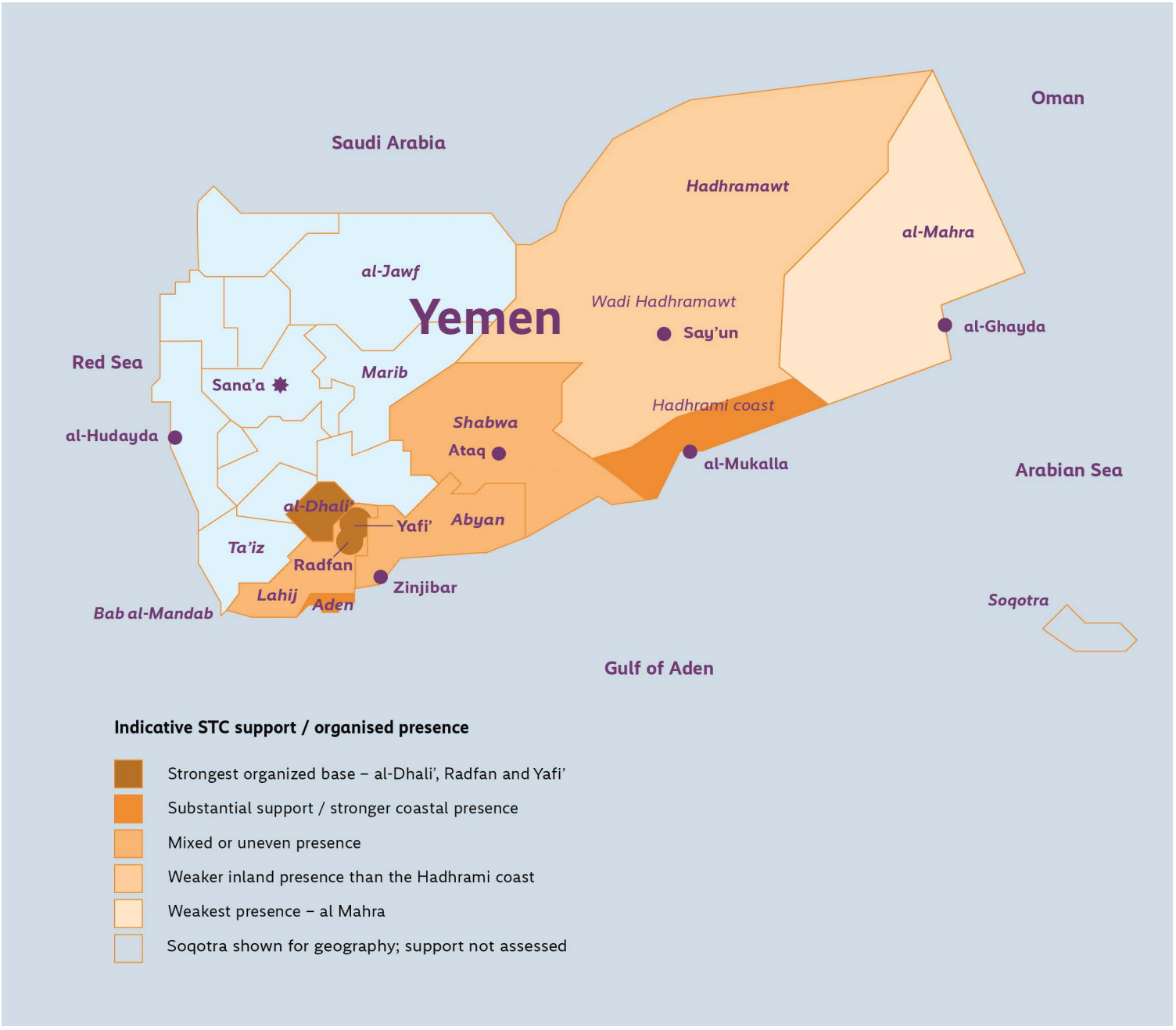
Post-war politics cannot be mapped through political organisations alone. Formal military regions, Nation's Shield Forces, the Giants Brigades, restructured former STC formations, governorate security forces and tribal formations each exercise different combinations of coercive and institutional authority. Formal incorporation into the ministries of defence or interior has not necessarily produced operational integration or a single chain of command (confidential interview 2026f).

The expanding role of Salafi-linked formations illustrates the distinction between military effectiveness and political representation. The Giants Brigades and elements of the Nation's Shield Forces possess cohesion and battlefield experience, but Salafism in Yemen is not a unified political movement. Supporters of Abu Zara'a al-Muharrami, who leads the Giants Brigades, regard him as an effective southern leader whose rise initially occurred within the STC-aligned security order. Critics fear that military effectiveness is being converted into political authority despite there being no history of representing southern grievances. In Hadhramawt and al-Mahra, there is an additional concern that security reorganisation under Aden-linked commanders could reproduce the centralisation that local constituencies resist.

Traditional parties retain influence of a different kind. The Islah Party has been substantially weakened in southern military and public life, but it continues to maintain social, educational and tribal networks. The General People's Congress similarly retains experienced officials despite organisational fragmentation. Smaller Hirak organisations may possess less coercive power, yet their re-emergence after January 2026 matters, because excluding them would again confuse control with representation.

Fig. 2

*Map 2: Indicative Geography of STC Support in Southern Yemen*




Source: Authors' illustration based on geoBoundaries gbOpen Yemen ADM1 administrative boundary data (2017), derived from OpenStreetMap/Wambacher, licensed under ODbL 1.0. Indicative patterns of STC support and organisational presence reflect the authors' qualitative assessment of the sources and interviews discussed in this paper (geoBoundaries n.d.).

## Hadhramawt and the Territorialisation of Southern Politics

Hadhramawt most clearly exposes the limits of treating the South as a single constituency. Its size, hydrocarbon resources, strong local identity and internal coast–valley divide give rise to political demands that cannot be reduced to support for, or opposition to, secession. The Hadhramawt Inclusive Conference, Tribal Alliance, National Council, local authorities and security formations each represent parts of this landscape, but none can claim uncontested provincial representation.

The formation of the Supreme Hadhrami Coordination Council in August 2026 represents an attempt to consolidate these positions before any wider southern negotiation. Its declared position — that Hadhramawt should enter negotiations with its own political project and exercise greater influence over its resources — illustrates how provincial representation can challenge both a Sana'a-centred government and an Aden-centred southern project. Similar dynamics operate in al-Mahra, where local identity and sensitivity to outside military presence are particularly strong, and in Shabwa.

## Regional Interests and Southern Agency

Saudi Arabia's priorities include border security, preservation of a workable Yemeni state, containment of the Houthis and protection of strategic approaches through Hadhramawt and al-Mahra. The UAE's approach has placed greater emphasis on capable local security partners, maritime routes, ports and counterterrorism. Its direct role has contracted, but relationships developed through the STC and coastal forces continue to shape southern politics.

Some southern actors frame their projects as solutions to external security concerns in order to obtain resources and leverage. Saudi–Emirati differences have contributed to the polarisation of southern political and military networks, while southern factions have made limited progress towards overcoming these divisions independently. The result is a reciprocal relationship: regional competition fragments southern authority, while southern factions leverage that competition to strengthen local positions. Without incentives for southern actors to negotiate across regional alignments, regional fragmentation risks becoming embedded in southern political institutions and security structures.

The renewed war has also exposed disagreements among southern actors over the scope of military participation against the Houthis. Some factions support participation in wider operations alongside Saudi-backed government forces, whereas others favour limiting southern deployments to the defence of southern territory (confidential interview 2026g). This distinction raises questions about the political objectives for which southern forces are being mobilised, the guarantees offered to participating formations, and whether their involvement advances or hinders southern political demands.

Four competing political orders now coexist: an STC-led independent South; a federal or regionally autonomous system; a Saudi-supported Yemeni state with restructured southern security forces; and a de facto localisation of authority among governorates. None presently commands sufficient consent or coercive capacity to prevail alone. Any dialogue that treats the question of "who speaks for the South" as already answered will reproduce the very conflict it is intended to manage.

# 4. Prospects for a South–South Dialogue

**The dialogue needs credible procedures, differentiated mediation roles and phased negotiations.**

The Saudi-sponsored South–South Dialogue emerged from the confrontation of December 2025–January 2026. On 3 January 2026, Saudi Arabia welcomed a request by Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad al-Alimi to host an inclusive conference in Riyadh bringing together southern political constituencies to discuss solutions to the Southern Question (Saudi Press Agency 2026). The initiative acknowledged an essential political reality: reversing the STC's territorial gains had altered the balance of power without settling who represents the South, how its resources should be governed, or its future relationship with the Yemeni state.

The priority should be to preserve the dialogue as a credible political process during its suspension and establish conditions for its eventual resumption. This requires agreed rules for representation and decision-making, a clearer distinction between Saudi sponsorship and mediation, and a phased negotiating agenda that addresses immediate governance and security disputes without prejudging the South's political future.

## An Extended Preparatory Process

Between 11 and 16 February 2026, the Gulf Research Center convened four workshops in Riyadh involving approximately 50 southern figures. Participants considered the Southern Question's historical roots, constitutional options, reconciliation, transitional justice and the participation of women, youth and civil society (confidential interview 2026h). Further consultations took place, but renewed conflict has effectively suspended preparations as military operations take precedence. No agreed negotiating procedures, representation rules or revised timetable have emerged (confidential interview 2026i).

This suspension has created a political dilemma, because postponement allows security restructuring, appointments and institutional changes to reshape the landscape before southern constituencies can negotiate their future relationship with the state. The risk is that, by the time that dialogue eventually resumes, important questions of authority and representation will have effectively been settled through wartime decisions. The suspension also carries implications for the military campaign itself: the absence of political engagement may weaken trust between Saudi Arabia and parts of the southern political landscape, potentially complicating efforts to secure wider southern participation in operations against the Houthis. These competing assessments illustrate a central stabilisation dilemma: comprehensive negotiations may be difficult to sustain during military escalation, but postponing political engagement entirely may undermine the cohesion required for an effective military campaign.

## Sponsorship, Mediation and Guarantees

Saudi Arabia has the greatest regional leverage to convene parties, discourage escalation and support implementation. It is also an interested security actor, supporting government institutions and particular armed formations. There is a risk that having a single sponsor in control of participant selection, agenda-setting, facilitation and enforcement may convince competing constituencies that outcomes have been predetermined.

A clearer division of roles would strengthen Riyadh's political investment. Saudi Arabia could remain the principal sponsor and prospective guarantor, while a facilitation panel would be agreed to manage negotiations, and a technical secretariat would prepare options and record commitments. Saudi-Emirati differences need not be resolved before dialogue resumes, but a basic understanding that both sides will refrain from obstructing agreed arrangements would help prevent regional competition from undermining their implementation.

The deeper challenge concerns the credibility of political and security guarantees. Southerners have often expressed scepticism towards international and regional assurances, arguing that previous agreements had repeatedly failed to prevent the use of military force to alter political arrangements. From this perspective, retaining southern military capabilities is regarded as a more reliable guarantee against political marginalisation than external commitments (confidential interview 2026j). Yet the STC's own military expansion in December 2025 illustrates the limitations of relying on coercive power to secure political objectives. This creates a central dilemma: actors are reluctant to relinquish military leverage without credible guarantees, while the continued use of that leverage undermines the trust necessary for agreements to endure. The challenge is to develop guarantees that connect political commitments

to verifiable security arrangements, accountable institutions and agreed implementation procedures.

## A Phased Negotiating Mandate

Interlocutors familiar with preparations describe a possible three-phase concept. Southern constituencies would first formulate political and institutional options. These would subsequently be discussed with northern actors in the internationally recognised government's camp, and eventually with representatives from Houthi-controlled areas. This would allow southerners to shape proposals without any assumption that constitutional changes affecting the entire country could be imposed unilaterally (confidential interview 2026k).

Once conditions permit dialogue to resume, its immediate mandate should focus on practical arrangements that reduce confrontation and preserve political space: non-retaliation, participation, procedures for reviewing contested appointments to government, governorate and security posts, security deconfliction, revenue transparency, salaries and essential services. Competing projects — independence, federalism, autonomy or unity — should be developed without any requirement for immediate agreement. Subsequent negotiations could address constitutional arrangements, territorial authority and resource-sharing, with the relationship between southern deliberation and national consent specified beforehand.

## Representation Without Predetermined Outcomes

The STC's military setback did not extinguish its independence constituency, just as its earlier territorial control did not establish a mandate to speak for the wider South. Rules of representation must be negotiated before seats are allocated. A diverse interim preparatory committee should publish draft procedures for nomination, eligibility, selection, conflict-of-interest and appeals for consultation. Selection criteria could include demonstrated constituency support and organisational presence, rather than relying solely on armed strength or regional sponsorship.

Relying on two complementary channels might make it possible to avoid conflating political preference with territorial representation. A political channel could develop competing constitutional projects, while governorate consultations could identify priorities concerning resources, local administration, services, land and security. Both would transmit proposals to a common forum through technical committees. A residency-and-stake principle, encompassing people who live in and are affected by decisions concerning southern governorates, would offer a more inclusive starting point than ancestry-based exclusion, though this would itself have to be negotiated.

Meaningful inclusion also requires accountability beyond the negotiating table. Governorate consultations should report which proposals reached negotiators and which were accepted or rejected. Independent civil society, including women's and youth organisations, should monitor procedural fairness, intimidation and implementation. Track 2 initiatives can preserve channels to reluctant or excluded actors during the suspension and prepare options for future negotiations.

# 5. Required Policy Response

**Targeted support to resolve immediate disputes, manage structural disagreements and contain coercion.**

The suspension of the South–South Dialogue raises an important strategic question: whether prioritising military operations against the Houthis justifies postponing political engagement with southern constituencies. In Yemen, allowing military restructuring, appointments and resource decisions to proceed without corresponding political engagement risks deepening southern divisions and weakening cooperation among government-aligned actors. Yet convening comprehensive negotiations during active military escalation could divert political attention and produce commitments that cannot be implemented.

A more realistic approach involves neither an immediate resumption of the full South–South Dialogue nor a suspension of political engagement until the war ends. Military operations should be accompanied by a limited political stabilisation effort focused on preserving communication among southern constituencies, preventing coercive changes to contested institutions, addressing immediate grievances, and preparing the procedural foundations for future negotiations. Saudi Arabia should retain responsibility for political sponsorship and coordination with the Yemeni government, while European partners can support discreet consultations, institutional capacity and independent monitoring.

The recommendations below distinguish between what must be resolved now, what must be managed over time, and what needs to be contained across political, economic and security priorities. “Resolve now” refers to immediate procedural disputes and verified, financeable remedies; structural negotiations and measures to contain coercion must proceed alongside them. Equally, “manage over time” does not mean waiting until the war ends.

## Political Priorities

**Resolve now.** Saudi Arabia and Yemeni authorities should maintain discreet channels with southern political movements, governorate representatives and civic actors to address contested appointments, institutional access and security deployments that risk generating further confrontation. These consultations should preserve political participation and prepare agreed procedures for representation and decision-making once formal negotiations can resume.

A clearer division of roles would strengthen Riyadh’s political investment in Southern dialogue: Saudi Arabia sponsors and supports implementation; Yemeni participants agree representation procedures; agreed facilitators manage negotiations; and a secretariat records proposals, decisions and responsibilities.

European partners could support this preparatory work through existing mediation and Track 2 initiatives without establishing a competing political process.

**Manage over time.** Once dialogue resumes, a manageable negotiating forum should connect political currents with governorate consultations addressing decentralisation, resources, local authority and constitutional alternatives. STC-linked groups and other southern movements should have opportunities for peaceful participation under agreed procedures for nomination, selection and appeals that assess constituency support and a willingness to negotiate, rather than military strength or regional sponsorship. These procedures should provide meaningful opportunities for women, youth and civic constituencies to shape proposals and participate in decision-making. Saudi Arabia should remain the principal sponsor, while facilitators acceptable to the participants manage negotiations, and a technical secretariat records proposals, decisions and implementation responsibilities. Consistent with Al-Amrani and Pickhardt’s (2026: 13) recommendations, independent Yemeni civil society should monitor inclusivity and implementation. The negotiating forum should publish reasoned responses indicating which consultation proposals it accepts, defers or rejects. Participants should also agree on how southern proposals will enter eventual nationwide negotiations, in coordination with the UN-led process and without presuming that the southern forum can determine constitutional outcomes for the entire country. European partners could support these arrangements through existing peacebuilding initiatives.

Within this longer-term track, greater governorate-level authority could offer a practical area of negotiation before agreement on final political status is reached. Proposals to expand local responsibility over administration, service delivery, resource management and aspects of local security deserve consideration as interim confidence-building measures, provided they are supported by clear legal mandates and accountability mechanisms, and that financial responsibilities have been defined.

**Contain.** Restrictions should target intimidation, violence and attacks on institutions, not peaceful demands for independence, federalism or decentralisation. Service delivery, grievance redress and security deconfliction are not distractions from the military campaign; they help prevent internal political tensions from undermining it. European missions and rights partners could monitor reprisals, support legal assistance and establish confidential complaints channels.

## Economic and Governance Priorities

**Resolve now.** The Yemeni government should verify implementation of previous decisions before announcing additional remedies. It should do this in collaboration with governorate authorities by working through responsible ministries, land commissions and existing personnel-redress commissions. This review should establish which payments and reinstatements have been completed, and identify outstanding entitlements, unresolved land claims and pending appeals. Aggregate findings, eligibility criteria and prioritisation rules should be published, while individual claimants should have access to their records and be given a clear procedure for challenging decisions. Each responsible authority should prepare a costed implementation schedule identifying available financing, outstanding funding requirements and responsibility for authorising remedies. Verified claims should then proceed through funded stages, with progress reported regularly. European assistance should support records verification, independent legal aid, claims administration and implementation monitoring, while decisions on entitlements and responsibility for financing them remain with the competent Yemeni authorities.

An immediate service stabilisation effort should prioritise reliable electricity during the hot summer months, particularly in Aden and Hadhramawt. The Ministry of Electricity, public electricity providers, finance authorities and governorate administrations should agree a costed summer operating plan before the time of peak demand that covers fuel procurement and delivery, urgent maintenance, critical network repairs and continuity of supply to hospitals and water facilities. More predictable electricity provision would address a visible source of public distress and discontent, help sustain essential services and livelihoods, and offer a tangible demonstration of institutional responsiveness during the dialogue's suspension. European partners could support parallel efforts ranging from private sector investment to targeted repairs and procurement oversight, without assuming open-ended fuel or salary liabilities.

**Manage over time.** National finance authorities, producing governorates and affected southern constituencies should negotiate transparent interim arrangements for revenue collection, transfers, salary payments and priority services. These arrangements should specify administrative responsibilities, reporting requirements and review procedures, while explicitly reserving questions of resource ownership, permanent revenue-sharing and constitutional authority for subsequent political negotiations. Participation should not be treated as acceptance of a particular constitutional outcome. Longer-term electricity support should improve maintenance, network reliability, financial accountability and affordable supply, reducing dependence on repeated emergency fuel interventions. As Al-Amrani and Pickhardt (2026: 4) argue, European governance support should be sustained during renewed military escalation. Such assistance should strengthen existing Yemeni institutions and service-delivery capacity and be coupled with independent scrutiny of implementation and safeguards against parallel mechanisms.

**Contain capture.** European donors and implementing partners should work with existing ministries, governorate administrations and public oversight bodies to verify payrolls, strengthen procurement controls, report revenue collections and transfers, and support the investigation of unauthorised levies. Work done through public institutions should be accompanied by independent verification and accessible complaints procedures, particularly where those institutions are themselves implicated in capture or exclusion. Assistance agreements should specify reporting obligations, corrective measures, and arrangements for reviewing unresolved complaints. Where serious irregularities persist, partners should adjust the affected assistance while protecting essential services and legitimate beneficiaries. Competent Yemeni authorities should remain responsible for investigation and enforcement, with European support being used to strengthen their ability to maintain reliable records, identify irregularities and publicly account for corrective action.

## Security Priorities

**Resolve now.** Security deconfliction should precede premature force unification, particularly among government-aligned formations whose competing command structures remain a source of tension. Defence and interior institutions, commanders and governorate authorities should establish operational contacts, incident-reporting procedures and agreed restraints around contested deployments, ports and strategic infrastructure. As argued by Al-Khameri (2026: 12–13), security coordination mechanisms should manage immediate fragmentation while progressively strengthening the state's capacity to regulate, coordinate and oversee the security sector, rather than institutionalising parallel structures that substitute for legitimate public authority.

**Manage over time.** Security integration should address the problem of credible guarantees alongside organisational restructuring. Functional integration — joint communications, verified personnel records, professional standards, civilian oversight and accountable payroll — should proceed incrementally alongside written reciprocal commit-

ments on deployments, access to public institutions and non-retaliation. Participating authorities and commanders should agree procedures for reporting alleged breaches, reviewing evidence and verifying compliance through arrangements acceptable to the parties. Verified breaches should trigger corrective action within agreed timeframes, with unresolved or repeated violations referred to Saudi Arabia as sponsor and to the competent Yemeni authorities. Compliance should be reviewed before subsequent transfers of command or other integration steps are undertaken, so that participating formations do not relinquish military leverage without reciprocal assurances having been implemented. These arrangements should protect complainants and preserve access to judicial remedies. European partners could support technical verification, complaints procedures and civilian oversight, applying consistent human-rights and accountability standards regardless of a formation's regional sponsor.

**Contain.** Counterterrorism should target violent networks without criminalising communities or peaceful southern movements. European policing, financial investigation and maritime assistance should operate lawfully and connect offshore interdiction with accountable authorities on land.

## A Selective European Role

European engagement should complement Saudi Arabia's political leverage and the UN-led peace process by concentrating on areas where European institutions have established expertise and implementation capacity. The EU could support technical preparation for a resumed South–South Dialogue through existing peace support and Track 2 initiatives, including procedural advice, confidential facilitation and independent civil society monitoring. The EU-supported Peace Support Facility offers one existing channel for inclusive participation and local peacebuilding.

On governance, the EU could build on its cooperation with UNDP, including the SIERY and newly launched MASAR initiatives, to strengthen local administration, financial transparency and service delivery. European assistance to grievance-redress mechanisms should prioritise verification, administrative records, legal assistance and transparent monitoring rather than assuming responsibility for recurring salaries or compensation liabilities.

European security engagement should remain selective and conditional. The expanded mandate of EUNAVFOR ASPIDES, including cooperation with the Yemeni Coast Guard and links to CRIMARIO, offers opportunities for maritime coordination and institutional support within existing operational mandates. Interested member states and the UK could complement these efforts through technical assistance on security governance, deconfliction and civilian oversight. Assistance should strengthen accountable public institutions, apply consistent human rights standards and avoid reinforcing autonomous security structures.

European diplomatic engagement should support regional cooperation that strengthens southern political cohesion and accountable security arrangements. Building on their relationships with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, European actors could encourage a shared understanding in support of agreed participation procedures, restraint regarding contested institutions, and timely implementation of negotiated commitments. Such an understanding should reinforce reciprocal commitments by Yemeni participants and respect their ownership of the political process. European partners could also offer discreet support for communication between regional partners and an agreed Yemeni facilitation mechanism, providing a channel to clarify concerns and address differences before they escalate. Dialogue among southern constituencies with different regional relationships would complement these efforts, helping them identify common priorities while preserving space for diverse political preferences.

*Priorities for Southern Political Stabilisation*

Tab. 1

| Track & Problem | Resolve Now | Manage Over Time | Contain Throughout | Lead Responsibility | Possible European Contribution |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Political** Contested representation and diverse governorate interests require consent beyond elite appointments. | Maintain political and civic channels. Agree on the review of contested appointments and institutional access. Prepare nomination and appeals rules with meaningful participation by women, youth and governorate constituencies. | Connect political and governorate channels to a single forum. Separate Saudi sponsorship from agreed facilitation. Require reasoned responses to consultation proposals and reach an agreement on how southern options can enter nationwide negotiations. | Protect peaceful advocacy and provide confidential channels for complaints. Encourage Saudi-Emirati coordination in support of agreed selection procedures, restraint concerning contested institutions, and timely implementation of negotiated commitments. | Yemeni authorities and southern constituencies agree on procedures. Saudi Arabia acts as the sponsor; agreed facilitators and a secretariat administer the process. Independent civic actors monitor participation and follow-up. | Support procedural advice, accessible participation and independent monitoring through eligible peace-support channels. Bilateral diplomacy should promote regional restraint and coordination with the UN-led process (European External Action Service 2025; Al-Amrani/Pickhardt 2026: 13). |
| **Economic and governance** Unimplemented remedies, disputed revenues and summer electricity failures undermine confidence. | Verify personnel and land claims; publish aggregate findings and a costed remedy schedule with appeals. Agree a funded salary calendar and summer electricity plan covering fuel, urgent repairs, critical facilities and published supply targets. | Use interim collection, transfer and reporting arrangements without prejudging resource ownership or final sharing. Negotiate local powers and financing; phase funded remedies and improve reliable, affordable electricity supply beyond emergency provision. | Audit payroll, procurement and fuel deliveries. Publish transfers and supply performance. Protect claims data; independently review complaints. Require corrective action where institutions are implicated in capture or exclusion. | Measures are implemented by financial and electricity authorities, public electricity providers, governorates and redress bodies. Public oversight bodies review delivery; financing partners specify commitments for amounts, responsibilities and duration. | Support claims administration, legal aid, procurement oversight and service monitoring. Use eligible MASAR/local governance assistance; assess separate targeted electricity support. Avoid open-ended salary, compensation or fuel liabilities (UNDP 2026). |
| **Security** Fragmented commands and weak guarantees sustain reliance on autonomous military power. | Establish contacts and deployment restraints. Record reciprocal commitments on deployments, institutional access and non-retaliation; agree protected reporting, evidence review and verification processes acceptable to the parties. | Link communications, personnel records, payroll and professional standards to political assurances and civilian oversight. Review compliance and address verified breaches before subsequent command transfers or force-integration steps. | Require time-bound corrective action; refer unresolved or repeated breaches to Saudi sponsors and competent Yemeni authorities. Protect complainants, investigate abuses and apply rights standards consistently across formations. | Yemeni civilian authorities and participating commanders implement commitments. An agreed mechanism verifies compliance; competent authorities pursue accountability. Saudi Arabia supports corrective action and uses its leverage against obstruction. | Support technical verification, complaints systems and civilian oversight. Keep ASPIDES/Coast Guard/CRIMARIO cooperation within mandate; wider land-security assistance requires separate assessment and instruments (Council of the European Union 2026). |

# Bibliography


ACLED (2025): Middle East Overview: December 2025 (2025). https://acleddata.com/update/middle-east-overview-december-2025 (1.11.2026).

ACLED (2026): Middle East Overview: January 2026 (2026). https://acleddata.com/update/middle-east-overview-january-2026 (1.11.2026).

Al-Amrani, Mohammed; Pickhardt, Julia (2026): Fragile Consolidation: Yemen's New Government and the Case for European Governance Engagement. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and CARPO, September 2026. https://carpo-bonn.org/en/publications/carpo-cooperations/fragile-consolidation-yemen-s-new-government-and-the-case-for-european-governance-support (18.10.2026).

Al-Khameri, Ahmed A. (2026): From Hybrid Security Arrangements to Good Enough SSR in Yemen. CARPO Brief No. 29 (3 August 2026), pp. 12–13. https://carpo-bonn.org/en/publications/carpo-briefs/from-hybrid-security-arrangements-to-good-enough-ssr-in-yemen (18.10.2026).

Ardemagni, Eleonora (2026): Yemen's Saudi-Driven Security and Military Restructuring: Trends and Key Factors. in: The Yemen Review, Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, April–June 2026 (31 July 2026). https://sanaacenter.org/the-yemen-review/april-june-2026/28107 (18.10.2026).

Vertrauliches Interview (2026a): a southern political figure, Aden, September 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026b): a southern political figure, Riyadh, October 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026c): a senior Yemeni government official, Riyadh, October 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026d): a southern political figure, Riyadh, October 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026e): a Yemeni government official, Aden, September 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026f): a senior Yemeni government official, Amman, September 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026g): a southern political figure, Riyadh, October 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026h): a southern political figure, Riyadh, October 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026i): a senior Yemeni government official, Riyadh, October 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026j): a southern political figure, Riyadh, October 2026.

Vertrauliches Interview (2026k): a southern political figure, Aden, September 2026.

Council of the European Union (2026): Maritime security: Council updates mandates of EU naval operations ASPIDES and ATALANTA (30 March 2026). https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/03/30/maritime-security-council-updates-mandates-of-eu-naval-operations-aspides-and-atalanta/ (1.11.2026).

El Yaakoubi, Aziz; Alghobari, Mohammed (2023): Houthi official says Yemen peace talks made progress, further rounds planned. in: Reuters, 14 April 2023. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-houthi-peace-talks-yemens-sanaa-conclude-with-further-rounds-planned-2023-04-14/ (18.10.2026).

European External Action Service (2025): Building peace through partnership: EU's support to the Peace Support Facility in Yemen (16 November 2025). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/yemen/building-peace-through-partnership-eus-support-peace-support-facility-yemen_en (1.11.2026).

geoBoundaries (n.d.): gbOpen Yemen ADM1 administrative boundaries (2017). Derived from OpenStreetMap/Wambacher; Open Data Commons Open Database License 1.0. https://www.geoboundaries.org/api/current/gbOpen/YEM/ADM1/ (1.11.2026).

Government of Yemen; Southern Transitional Council (2019): Riyadh Agreement between the Legitimate Government of Yemen and the Southern Transitional Council (5 November 2019), Annexes I–III. PA-X Peace Agreements Database. https://www.peaceagreements.org/agreements/2235/ (18.10.2026).

Gulf Cooperation Council (2011): Agreement on the Implementation Mechanism for the Transition Process in Yemen in Accordance with the Initiative of the Gulf Cooperation Council (23 November 2011), paragraphs 20–21. PA-X Peace Agreements Database. https://www.peaceagreements.org/agreements/758/ (18.10.2026).

Human Rights Watch (2009): In the Name of Unity: The Yemeni Government's Brutal Response to Southern Movement Protests (15 December 2009). https://www.hrw.org/reports/southyemen1209web.pdf (18.10.2026).

National Dialogue Conference (2013): Outcome of the Subcommittee of the Southern Working Group: Agreement on a Just Solution to the Southern Question (23 December 2013). https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/140118_agreement_on_the_southern_question_en_final.pdf (18.10.2026).

Political Forces Dialogue Committee (1994): The Document of Pledge and Accord (1994). English translation hosted by the Human Rights Information and Training Center. https://hritc.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Document-of-Pledge-and-Accord-1994-and-Notes-on-the-Document-of-Pledge-and-Accord.pdf (1.11.2026).

Regions Committee (2014): Final Decision on the Delimitation of the Federal Regions (10 February 2014), pp. 2–3. PA-X Peace Agreements Database. https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag1508_577ba89623b6e.pdf (18.10.2026).

Saudi Press Agency (2020): Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Proposes to Yemeni Government, Southern Transitional Council Mechanism to Accelerate Implementation of Riyadh Agreement (29 July 2020). https://www.spa.gov.sa/2115315 (18.10.2026).

Saudi Press Agency (2026): Saudi Arabia Welcomes Yemeni Presidential Leadership Council President's Request to Convene Conference in Riyadh for All Southern Factions (3 January 2026). https://www.spa.gov.sa/fr/N2480670 (18.10.2026).

Southern Transitional Council (2025): The STC Issues Keynote Statement on Developments in Hadramaut and Al-Mahra Governorates (26 December 2025). https://en.stcaden.com/posts/12660 (1.11.2026).

Transfeld, Mareike (2019): Peace and State Fragmentation in Yemen. in: Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (22 November 2019). https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2019/11/peace-and-state-fragmentation-in-yemen (18.10.2026).

United Nations Development Programme (2026): The EU advances locally led development and recovery in Yemen through a €9 million agreement with UNDP (6 October 2026). https://www.undp.org/yemen/press-releases/eu-advances-locally-led-development-and-recovery-yemen-through-eur9-million-agreement-undp (1.11.2026).

World Bank (2025): Economic Hardship Deepens in Yemen (17 November 2025). https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/11/17/economic-hardship-deepens-in-yemen (18.10.2026).

Yemen Arab Republic; People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (1990): Agreement Establishing a Union between the State of the Yemen Arab Republic and the State of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (22 April 1990). PA-X Peace Agreements Database. https://www.peaceagreements.org/agreements/264/ (1.11.2026).

Yemen Policy Center (2022): Yemen's Incomplete National Dialogue: Insights on the Design and Negotiations Dynamics (2022). https://www.yemenpolicy.org/yemens-incomplete-national-dialogue/ (18.10.2026).

# About the Project and about the Authors

## About the Project

This paper is part of the 'Yemen Policy Analysis' series implemented jointly by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) and CARPO. Against the backdrop of profound political and socio-economic transformations in Yemen, this project supports the development of publications on key questions of governance, sustainable conflict resolution, and economic stabilisation with a focus on areas under the control of the internationally recognised government. It combines in-depth analyses of current developments with short briefing papers contextualising core political dynamics to formulate realistic and actionable recommendations for German and international decisionmakers. By combining policy briefs, short-term analyses, and accompanying expert discussions and briefings, the project contributes to raising political awareness of Yemen and supports informed policy-making processes.

## About the Authors

**Ahmed Al-Khameri** is a member of Chemonics' Conflict and Stabilization Practice and serves as Team Lead of the UK-funded Yemen Flexible Funding Mechanism. He is a national security and international policy specialist with more than 15 years of experience working on conflict, stabilisation, and governance in the Middle East. He has advised the UK government, US government, and international partners on Yemen and the wider region, combining policy analysis with programme leadership in complex and politically sensitive environments. His work focuses on the intersection of security governance, political settlements, and stabilisation policy in fragmented conflict settings. Ahmed is a Chevening Scholar and holds an MA in International Politics from City University London.

Contact: aalkhameri@chemonics.com

**Martin Jerrett** was the Senior Political Affairs Officer in the Office of the Special Envoy to Yemen for two years, advising both Jamal Benomar and, later, his successor Ismail Ould Chaikh Ahmed on southern Yemen. He engaged with a variety of southern political groups in an effort to bring them into the peace process and the National Dialogue. Since 2016 he has continued his work on Yemen for the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He is also a member of the British Yemeni Society and is a regular contributor to the *British Yemeni Society Journal*.

Contact: martin_jerrett@yahoo.com

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung

*In cooperation with:*

CARPO
Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient