

THE POLITICAL CHALLENGE OF YEMEN'S SOUTHERN MOVEMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PAPER IN A NUTSHELL

- A product of the troubled 1990 unification of North and South Yemen, the Southern Movement today represents a serious threat to Yemen's stability, and possibly its survival within its current borders. The movement was founded with a modest set of demands—equality with citizens in the North, jobs, greater local decision-making power, and more control over the South's economic resources. However, as the Yemeni government has cracked down on its supporters, the Southern Movement has gradually become more radicalized and now talks openly of secession. It is not too late, though, for the Yemeni government to reverse this alarming trend. To do so it must refrain from using military force against the Southern Movement and instead act swiftly to address the legitimate political and economic grievances that gave rise to the movement in the first place.

VITAL STATISTICS

- After decades as separate, independent countries, North and South Yemen united in 1990.
- On many levels, real unification never took place. The two armed forces were never integrated or placed under a single command and the unification process failed to solve basic problems of national identity, economic development, and representative government.
- Northerners, who outnumber southerners more than four to one, today wield the lion's share of political and economic power in Yemen.
- Established in 2007, the Southern Movement is a political umbrella for multiple opposition groups based out of the former South Yemen. It is decentralized and has no formal leadership structure.
- Over time, the Southern Movement has grown more radicalized, with some elements calling for secession and the reestablishment of an independent South Yemen.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY MAKERS

- **Let Arab countries take the lead:** The United States remains deeply unpopular within Yemen and should avoid the appearance of meddling in the country's domestic politics. International efforts to encourage reconciliation within Yemen stand a greater chance of success if Arab governments take the lead, while the United States operates quietly in the background.
- **Discourage the use of military force against the Southern Movement:** A military campaign against the Southern Movement would only further inflame its supporters and push them closer to al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). To avoid this outcome, the United States and partner countries should encourage the Yemeni government to resolve the conflict through political, rather than military, means.
- **Support national reconciliation in Yemen:** The United States and other concerned countries should encourage the Yemeni government and representatives of the Southern Movement to open talks aimed at bringing about national reconciliation. Such talks should incorporate a broad range of stakeholders, including exiled southern political leaders, domestic political opponents, women, and business leaders.
- **Support a shift in power away from the central government:** The United States should support a shift in power away from the Yemeni central government in favor of greater local control. Such a step would allow all Yemenis—northerners and southerners alike—to feel they have a say in their government and reduce the chances that they take up arms against it.
- **Press for improved governance and human rights:** To help eliminate the grievances that gave rise to the Southern Movement in the first place, the United States should continue encouraging Sanaa to stamp out corruption, respect human rights, allow political opponents to organize peacefully, and lift recently imposed restrictions on freedom of the press.

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