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Renewed Vigor or More of the Same.**
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Introduction

Unexpectedly, on April 7, Yemen's President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who was in exile in Saudi Arabia, announced that he was stepping down and irreversibly handing powers over to a presidential council. The decision came with the concluding of the GCC-brokered "[Yemeni-Yemeni talks](#)" that was hosted by Riyadh- a peace-effort wherein all warring factions and feuding elites of the Yemen conflict were brought together, for the first time in over a decade, to bring peace and stability to the war-torn country.

On April 19, the president of Yemen's new leadership council, [Rashad al-Alimi](#), along with the [other members](#) of the council – Sultan Ali Al-Arada, Tariq Mohammed Saleh, Abdulrahman Abu Zara'a, Abdullah Bawazeer, Othman Hussein Megally, Aidarous Qassem Al-Zubaidi (the head of the separatist Southern Transitional Council) and Faraj Salmin Al-Bahsani (governor of Hadramout governorate) – were sworn in in Aden, which currently serves as Yemen's temporary capital. The formation of the new leadership council is a consequence of a massive political reshuffling, which has gained traction in the last two months. The shake-up is an attempt to end the years-long brutal Yemen war, which grew more violent in the beginning of the year.

So, what does the milestone move, the formation of the Yemeni Presidential Council, mean? Is the development related to Yemeni internal politics or is it part of the larger regional politics?

A Crucial Milestone, But...

It is no secret that the Arab alliance in Yemen was initially a collaboration between Saudi and UAE. Later, in 2019, the Emirates withdrew completely from Yemen in what was said to be an attempt to [end](#) the power struggle between the southern separatists and the Hadi government. However, the Emirati withdrawal in fact promoted the power struggle and greater internal factions within Yemen, as UAE continued to support Non- State Actors (NSAs). In fact, three of the UAE-backed NSAs have representation in the new Yemeni Council. This confirms that ending Yemen's power struggle was in fact not the aim of the Emirati withdrawal. Meanwhile, Saudi was trying to promote the internationally recognized Hadi administration as Yemen's legitimate government. With UAE's exit, Saudi Arabia was left alone to battle things out in Yemen. Consequently, with KSA being a supporter of the Hadi administration, the Saudi oil facilities became targets of Houthi drones time and again. Evidently, the Saudi-UAE efforts in Yemen were not as coordinated since

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they were driven by opposing interests. The enduring role played by the UAE, particularly in operations in [Marib and Shabwah](#), provoked the Houthis.

The January 2022 escalation saw Houthi drones attacking key strategic locations in the UAE. Making one wonder if the Saudi-UAE divorce in Yemen was temporary in nature. The escalation seemed to reveal the inherent fragility of the Emirati strategy in Yemen, which is replacing confrontation with diplomacy and dialogue. Nevertheless, the attacks strongly brought the Emirates back into the picture. The GCC-brokered Yemen's new leadership council could be proof that the Emirates is very much still a strong player in the country. In 2021, the Saudis and Emiratis seemed to be buying time due to uncertainties. However, today [this strategy](#) has not been instrumental in realizing their goals, the countries are now taking action. The Yemeni leadership council is the action that Saudi and UAE are taking.

The decision of the new presidency council was heartily [welcomed](#) in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Riyadh [expressed](#) its "full support for the Presidential Leadership Council and its supporting entities". Together, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi pledged \$3 billion in emergency aid to Yemen. The Sultanate of Oman, a significant player due to its involvement with the Houthis and Iran and the fact that it shares a border with Yemen, also welcomed the decision. [Kuwait](#) welcomed the new leadership formation and assured its support. The Arab League, calling the council "an embodiment of Yemeni legitimacy," expressed its support as well.

Qatar, notably, has refrained from making an official statement

regarding the development in the Yemen conflict. Considering the prior history of tensions between Qatar and the Saudi-UAE bloc playing out in Yemen, the silence of the Qatari government may indicate Doha's discontent in the new leadership council of Yemen.

The Saudi-UAE Yemen strategy also has a Western angle. Washington has been in favor of the presidential council. The change in the Yemeni government could also be the latest effort by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to gain access to the Biden administration. The Biden administration has been closed off to both the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohamed bin Zayed (MBZ). Yemen's presidential council may be a way to regain access to Washington for MBS and MBZ.

Lastly, the elephant in the room – Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran will not be in favor of the new leadership council in Yemen. This move comes in the backdrop of the Saudi-Iran negotiations, with Iraqi mediation, that has been happening for a while now, behind closed doors. In this context, was the new council supposed to be a gesture of goodwill to Teheran? If so, Iran does not seem happy.

Where are the Yemenis heading?

The council turns a new page in the power transfer initiative which was [devised by](#) the GCC in 2011. It is a new chapter in Yemen's domestic matters and regional predicaments. The new council [brings together](#) discordant military and political forces who agree on a sole factor – ending the Houthi challenge to the former Hadi government. However, an issue that

could arise would be the question of legitimacy of the new Presidential council. The key roles played by Saudi and UAE in forming this council may lead to its members being perceived as links to the two regional powers who had backed the internationally recognized Hadi government that was in exile. Thus limiting the extent to which the new leadership can successfully bring about stability and peace in Yemen.

The primary issue arises from the fact that the council formation seems to be driven by regional politics rather than by Yemeni internal/domestic matters. Considering the developments, escalations and transformations of the Yemeni conflict in the last twelve years, four things are clear to an observer: first, the fragility of Yemen has increased; second, the support of regional players to NSAs and militias has increased; third, the role of NSAs and militias has increased; and last, the prospect of a united Yemen is slowly diminishing. Irrespective of desires and optimisms, facts on the ground show that the chance of gaining a successful united Yemen is slowly fading away. The fact that the newly formed presidential council is working from Aden and not from Sanaa, which is under Houthi control, supports the above argument. Having two political centers of power – Aden and Sanaa – will not bring stability in Yemen. The new council does not bring any serious change to the current status quo and if that were to be the objective, then it may see no success. The change in government appears to be a Saudi-Hadi coordinated strategy that has Emirati acquiescence. Simultaneously, it could also be a reconfirmation of the UAE withdrawal.

The Yemeni discourse must not be limited to just politics. There are urgent matters that need addressing. For over a decade, the destitute Yemeni population have been dreaming of peace, harmony, change, and progress. Due to the crisis, [24.3 million](#) people are “at risk” of hunger and disease, over 14.4 million in acute need of assistance, and roughly [3 million](#) people are displaced. The war has left [11.7 million](#) individuals impoverished and 4.9 million malnourished (600,000 of who are children under the age of 5), and has reduced economic growth by \$88.8 billion. The presidential council does not contribute to the realization of the dreams and hopes of the common man. In Yemen, uncertainties continue, aspirations remain unaddressed, and untold stories linger in the dark.

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About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

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