Executive Summary:
The Southern Mobility Movement (SMM) of south Yemen, an umbrella organization for many secessionist oriented groups in the south, is using the increasing weakness of the Salih government and eroding state authority to its advantage. The absence of central state authority, already weak in many parts of the south, is giving the SMM and its member groups more political capital and more opportunities to assert authority over the affairs of southern Yemen. Since its creation in 2008 under the nominal leadership of General Nasser al-Nuba, the SMM has been dedicated to redressing many grievances of the south dating from the 1990 unification and the 1994 civil war between north and south Yemen. The Southern Mobility Movement, whose members originally called for “equal rights” and “equal citizenship” with north Yemenis, transformed its goal to secession and the re-creation of an independent south Yemeni state. With the outbreak of countrywide anti-government demonstrations in February 2011, the SMM intensified its efforts and has played a key role in organizing protests and strikes across the south. Similarly, key figures within the SMM, including General Nuba, have stated that the organization stands in solidarity with the anti-government protesters in Sana’a and elsewhere in the north.

Introduction
The impasse between the government of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Salih and anti-government protesters, now in its third month, is eroding central-state control across Yemen. In many areas, basic services provided by the state, which are already severely limited, have been interrupted or stopped. The economic impact of the protests and ongoing unrest is severe. Cooking gas, U.S. dollars, and diesel fuel are in short supply or unavailable in many areas of the country – notably the capital Sana’a and in the port city of Aden (Yemen News, March 24; Yemen News Agency, April 2).

In southern Yemen, where a secessionist movement known as the Southern Mobility Movement (SMM) [al-Harakat al-Janubiyya] was active long before the outbreak of anti-government demonstrations, members of the SMM are increasing their levels of organization and increasingly attempting to step in where the government is now absent. Rising levels of instability in Yemen and the Saleh government’s heavy handed response to anti-government demonstrations across the country are providing the SMM with both more political capital and more opportunities to assert their authority over the affairs of southern Yemen.

Two States
Politically and socio-culturally, south Yemen is quite distinct from north Yemen. There have been few times in
Yemen’s history where the country has been unified under one ruler or regime. Yemen’s mountainous topography has never been particularly conducive to unity or the control of a strong centralized state. For much of the last two hundred years, southern Yemen was divided into numerous tribal fiefdoms and sultanates that were largely autonomous.

The British arrived in south Yemen in 1839 and established an outpost at Aden which became a Crown Colony in 1937. For most of their time in south Yemen, the British pursued a largely pragmatic, cost effective, and conflict minimizing policy of limited and strategic engagement with south Yemen’s traditional rulers. However as the strategic and economic importance of the port of Aden grew and the expansionist aims of north Yemen’s ruler, Imam Yahyah, became clearer, the need to secure what the British termed the hinterlands—the vast areas to the east and west of Aden—became acute. The British formed the Eastern and Western Protectorates and increased the pace of their efforts to bring the regions’ tribal sheikhs and sultans into the British sphere of influence through a combination of mutual protection treaties, subsidies, and the deployment of resident political advisors.

The British attempted to establish a more formal state structure in south Yemen in 1963 with the creation of the Federation of South Arabia. However, the preparations for the independence of south Yemen did little to quell the rising tide of south Yemeni nationalism that was being stoked and aided in part by Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser. South Yemeni nationalists were split into two groups: the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY). From 1963 until the British departure from south Yemen in 1967, the two groups fought a guerrilla war against the British while they fought one another for control of the soon to be independent south Yemen. The leftist NLF gained the upper hand and quickly consolidated its grip on power in the newly independent People's Republic of South Yemen.

The more radical Marxist wing of the NLF took over in 1969 and changed the name of the country to the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The leaders of the PDRY established ties with the Soviet Union and Cuba and embarked upon ‘reform’ programs that were aimed at remaking the country along Leninist/socialist lines. These ‘reform’ programs attempted to replace tribalism and Islam with loyalty to the state, state ideology, and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP). In many parts of the country the reforms were arguably successful: tribalism was suppressed and some cultural values were altered. Women were included in parts of the government, veiling by women declined, schools were made coeducational, and a system of centralized bureaucratic institutions replaced much of the traditional authority of elders, sheikhs and sultans.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, which had been a primary source of foreign aid, the already weak economy of the PDRY was in danger of collapse. The rapidly deteriorating economy in the south and a belief by the governments of both the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) and the PDRY that they could achieve political hegemony over one another drove the two states to unify in 1990. Unification efforts were marred by a spate of assassinations of politicians from the former PDRY in the run up to the 1993 elections. The Yemeni Socialist Party performed poorly in the elections and as a result, the framework for unification broke down. In April 1994, Ali Salim al-Beidh, former head of the YSP and former Vice President of the unified Republic of Yemen (ROY), declared the formation of the Democratic Republic of Yemen (DRY). The forces of ROY quickly put down the attempted secession.

Following the attempted secession, President Salih and much of his government pursued a punitive policy in south Yemen: most of the officer and NCO corps of the south’s armed forces was forcibly retired; many bureaucrats in the south’s government were forced out; and tribal and political allies of the Salih government were allowed to seize southern properties and land. The punitive measures taken by the Saleh government largely set the tone for north-south relations in the post-unification era.

**Capitalizing on Political and Historical Differences**

The Salih government’s abandonment of the 1990 framework for unification and its failure to implement long promised reforms like federalization combined with its reluctance to address issues like property seizures and forced retirements have stoked anger among many residents of south Yemen. Initially in the years after the 1994 civil war, with the development of Yemen’s limited oil reserves, the Salih government used some of the revenue from Yemen’s oil exports to try to extend the already well established patronage network to the south. (In the north, President Salih maintained much of his control over the country through an elaborate and well funded
patronage network that bought the loyalty of key tribal and political figures.) The efficacy of the patronage network's extension to the south is debatable. It could also be argued that after years of unrest and war on both sides, residents of south Yemen were simply tired of fighting. However, as Yemen's oil production has declined, the money that was used to buy off and pacify influential figures in the south has largely dried up. This combined with the marked deterioration of the Yemeni economy has led to a reinvigoration of secessionist oriented movements.

While the PDRY's reforms and socialization efforts alienated many south Yemenis, the history of the south's relatively corruption free bureaucratic institutions and strong state control are cited by south Yemenis and members of secessionist organizations as one of the things that sets south Yemen apart from the north. The rhetoric of the southern secessionists draws on the south's 'modern' approach to governance as opposed to what is viewed by many south Yemenis as 'backward' tribal and traditional governance in the north. Members of the SMM also contrast the inclusion of women in the former PDRY's government and its judicial system with the north where more conservative views on the place of women predominate. However, the divide between north and south runs deeper than just the last hundred years of history.

Religious and even ethnic differences between the south and north are increasingly being incorporated into the rhetoric and narratives used by groups calling for secession. South Yemenis are largely Sunni members of the Shafi'i school of law while a majority of north Yemenis are—at least nominally—Zaidi (a conservative offshoot of the Shia branch of Islam). Traditionally, the largely Shafi'i southerners have practiced a less conservative form of Islam than their northern neighbors. For example, the Shafi'i tradition of pilgrimage to the tombs of saints is something that is forbidden by Zaidis. In addition to the religious differences between north and south Yemen, references to ethnic differences are also working their way into the narratives of some southern secessionists who point to the south's long history of trade and immigration with the East Indies, India and Africa. This ethnic mixing is contrasted with the perceived xenophobia of north Yemenis.

**Evolution of the Southern Mobility Movement**

By mid-2008, a number of “southern action” groups, under the nominal leadership of General Nuba, leader of the influential Association of Retired Southern Military Officers, began to organize under the banner of what became the Southern Mobility Movement (SMM). The SMM's leadership and organizational structure were – and remain – nebulous. As late as 2010, Nasser al-Khabji, a prominent member of the SMM in the Radfan area, described the SMM as “a popular movement under which come all civil society organizations, political parties, societies, sheikhs, dignitaries, academics, politicians, independents and others. We all believe in the peaceful struggle for restoring our legitimate rights” (Yemen Post, April 10, 2010). The SMM remains an umbrella organization for a number of groups, many of which have conflicting agendas. However, the SMM is broadly dedicated to redressing the many grievances dating from the 1990 unification and the 1994 civil war. Since 2008, the SMM’s calls for “equal rights” and “equal citizenship” with north Yemenis have been replaced by more strident calls for secession and the recreation of an independent south Yemeni state.

Protests and sit-ins organized by the SMM increased in frequency throughout 2009-10. In the southern cities of Aden, Mukulla, and Ataq, the SMM brought thousands of south Yemenis out onto the streets for its demonstrations that initially called for such things as “equal rights” and “equal representation.” During the latter half of 2009 and throughout 2010, the SMM's position underwent a noticeable shift toward calls for secession from the north rather than political engagement and dialogue. Much of this shift was driven by the Salih government’s heavy handed response to the frequent protests and strikes. Rather than engaging with the demands of the SMM and its constituent members, the Salih government pursued a more combative and militarized policy of escalation that resulted in a number of deaths both among protestors and state security services.

With the outbreak of countrywide anti-government demonstrations in February 2011, the SMM intensified its efforts and has played a key role in organizing protests and strikes across the south. Aden and Mukulla have both been the scenes of some of the most violent crackdowns by state security services. In the lead up to the Gulf Cup that was held in Aden and Zinjibar, the Yemeni Army deployed more than twenty thousand troops to the region, most of which remain, to bolster security. The Political Security Office (PSO) arrested and rearrested much of the SMM leadership—most notably Hassan Ba‘oum (al-Tagheer, February 19).
The arrests and deployment of additional troops have done nothing to increase security of state control in the south. The arrests in particular have inspired members of the SMM and anti-government protestors in general who frequently carry signs and placards with the faces of leaders and influential figures that are incarcerated.

**Consolidating Gains**

Due to its diffuse organizational structure and its lack of clearly defined leaders, it is difficult to assess what the SMM’s true agenda is. However, with the outbreak of anti-government protests, the SMM seemed to shift its strategy from one aimed at secession to one that may have supported a new unity government. Key figures within the SMM like Tariq al-Fadhli and General Nuba stated that south Yemenis stood in solidarity with anti-government protesters in Sana’a and elsewhere in the north. Signs at protests in Aden have had slogans like, “we are one with our northern brothers” written on them, though the flags of the former PDHY and DRY are still being flown by protestors across the south. However, General Nuba, who heads up the Supreme National Commission for the Independence of the South (SNC), announced in a communiqué on April 11 that the SNC encouraged the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to also address the issues in south Yemen after it had addressed the situation in the “Yemen Arab Republic.” The SNC, which functions under the broader SMM, remains dedicated to secession and the recreation of an independent south Yemen.

In Aden and Mukulla, efforts by members of the SMM are well underway to begin implementing local government initiatives. In Aden, the newly formed National Council of Aden has been holding meetings to address issues like holding elections and overseeing the provision of basic services (Aden Press, March 31). Initiatives to provide basic welfare services have already been implemented by SMM organizations in the relatively poorer areas of Aden and Mukulla. The National Council of Aden and other organizations are clearly aiming to expand on these efforts and make use of established networks. The absence of central state authority, already weak in many parts of the south, is giving and will give the SMM and its members ample opportunity and reason to attempt to fill the gaps in authority and the provision of services.

**The SMM and Armed Conflict?**

From its nominal founding by General Nuba in 2008, the SMM has maintained that it is dedicated to the peaceful redress of southern grievances and now seemingly to the re-creation of an independent south Yemen. General Nuba, who remains one of the most respected figures in south Yemeni political and military circles, has been a powerful and consistent advocate of non-violent protests and strikes. Despite the often heavy handed tactics of the Salih government, which have included shelling villages and blockading entire districts, the SMM has largely maintained its non-violent stance.

At least three attacks on military checkpoints have been blamed on SMM gunmen—the most recent on April 3 near the restive town of al-Habilayn in which one Yemeni solider was killed and three others were wounded (AFP, April 3; al-Tagheer, April 4). None of the organizations allied with SMM have claimed credit for any attacks. However, that does not mean that various secessionist oriented groups are not developing armed wings. Given the government’s tactics and the breakdown of state authority in many areas, it would only be logical to assume that armed groups dedicated to ensuring southern secession are forming and becoming active across the region. These groups can draw on the ample experience of the numerous well trained officers, NCO’s, and soldiers that made up the armed forces of the former PDHY. Many of the officers received training in the former Soviet Union and Cuba.

These groups will also be able to secure ample materiel for fighting and launching attacks against government forces. After the 1994 civil war, the Salih government was careful to remove many light arms and almost all of the medium and heavy weaponry from the former PDHY armed forces. However, securing weaponry in Yemen, though much easier in the north, is not difficult. Additionally, a number of arms depots and police stations have been raided. In Shabwa, the well stocked Central Security compound was looted after state forces withdrew (Arab News, March 28).

Despite al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operative Nasser al-Wuhayshi’s announcement of support for the secessionists in 2009, there does not seem to be any kind of nexus developing between AQAP/ Salafi militants and the SMM. The Salafi ideology and the idea of “global jihad” subscribed to by the al-Qaeda network are unlikely to appeal to many within the various secessionist movements. While the Marxist/ Leninist
ideologies of the PDRY have been discredited in the south, broader socialist ideologies have not been. The socialist past of south Yemen is something that makes up a large part of the secessionist narrative.

**Conclusion**

The unrest in Yemen will likely aid and strengthen the SMM and the broader push for secession in south Yemen. The increased weakness of the Salih government and the further erosion of state authority in the south are giving organizations like the SMM the operational space to assume more authority over what many in the south view as southern affairs. Whatever transitional government or opposition government eventually replaces the Salih regime, it will likely find it difficult to curtail this new found authority and growing sense of independence. Yet much of Yemen’s oil and gas wealth is located in the former PDRY. Economically, Yemen cannot afford to be divided. The only hope for keeping Yemen together is for southern grievances to be addressed and in the longer term, the promised plan for federalization should be implemented.

Notes:


Michael Horton is a Senior Analyst for Arabian Affairs at The Jamestown Foundation where he specializes on Yemen and the Horn of Africa. He also writes for Jane’s Intelligence Review, Intelligence Digest, Islamic Affairs Analyst, and the Christian Science Monitor. Mr. Horton studied Middle East History and Economics at the American University of Cairo and Arabic at the Center for Arabic Language and Eastern Studies in Yemen. Michael frequently travels to Yemen, Ethiopia, and Somalia.

**Back To Watson's Web**

---

**Copyright Statement of Jamestown:** All non-fee based materials contained on this website (Jamestown) are protected by United States copyright law and may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, published or broadcast provided that The Jamestown Foundation and the author of the article are credited and recognized in the article reprint. Under no circumstances shall non-fee based materials be posted to a fee based database or website for profit, or be sold or distributed for financial gains. If so, all the fees collected due to redistribution of non-fee based materials shall be remunerated to The Jamestown Foundation. You may not alter, remove, any trademark, copyright, any portion of the article or other notice from copies of the content.

All fee-based materials contained on this site are protected by United States copyright law and may not be produced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, downloaded from the Jamestown Foundation website, published or broadcast without paying the reprint fees requested by The Jamestown Foundation. You may not alter, remove, any trademark, copyright, any portion of the article or other notice from copies of the content.

To contact The Jamestown Foundation regarding issues related to copyright restrictions contact: