

Secular Lebanese student groups see political success amid national crisis

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BEIRUT: Student movements at Lebanese universities and independent civic groups are reorganizing themselves with the goal of changing the ruling authority in Lebanon.

Secular and independent clubs affiliated with the Mada network in Lebanon's universities launched the "Declaration of Lebanese Students" on Saturday, in light of "the unprecedented risks threatening students, especially the crisis of the dollarization of tuition fees."

That dollarization has seen tuition fees start to massively increase at institutions across the country, following decisions to adopt the Lebanese Central Bank's new exchange rate of 3,900 Lebanese pounds to the dollar. The American University of Beirut (AUB) saw its tuition costs increase 160 percent alone as a result.

Lebanon has been in the grip of a currency crisis ever since the pound, previously pegged at 1,500 to the dollar, began to devalue rapidly as a consequence of political and economic mismanagement, blamed by many on the country's elite.

Student elections at a number of private universities in Lebanon resulted in a series of unprecedented victories for independents, especially secular representatives, on representative councils this year, after decades of being held by students from the country's ruling parties.

The representative of the Secular Club at Saint Joseph University, student Charbel Shaya, said: "The independent, unified student movement has turned the tables after student representation was confiscated by parties in power. I believe that networking between us has led to achievement, and the time has come to fight the battle of refusing the dollarization of tuition fees as a prelude to rejecting what the parties committed against us as people."

Qamar Suleiman, a medical student at the University of Balamand, said:

"Political awareness in universities is one of the means for change. Politics controls the corners of our lives, and engaging in student elections is a step toward creating independent secular groups that believe in social justice to improve student life and protect their rights.

"We want to impose a truly progressive and clear political discourse that establishes grounds for individuals capable of practicing political life in a sound manner after graduation," he added. "The parties in power make us pay for things that we did not commit, but rather they did."

Manal Suleiman, an engineering student at Notre Dame University, said:

"Universities are the ones that should fear their students, just as governments should fear their people. Students today are reclaiming their role through independent student movements that aim for change."

And Jad Al-Hani, from the AUB, said: "The retreat of the (main) parties in

the student elections at the university was a declaration of defeat. The first battle we will fight is the battle against dollarizing tuition fees. We are headed toward an escalation in the coming days.”

On Saturday, the opposition member of Parliament, Brig. Gen. Chamel Roukoz, called on the Lebanese youth not to leave their homeland “in the custody of those who betrayed the land and the people.”

Roukoz, the son-in-law of President Michel Aoun, said: “The victory of student elections in universities is the best evidence of the failure of this authority, which today, more than ever, feels at risk of removal.”

Roukoz said during a meeting with his supporters, many of whom have participated in protests that have lasted months: “Two years after my entering the political arena, I see that the logic of obstruction overrides the logic of legislation – or legislation in the interest of profiteers ... at the people’s expense. There is no intention in the foreseeable future to adopt any correct anti-corruption policy, nor any real financial, economic, social, and rescue strategy to address the crisis from which the Lebanese people are suffering.”

He described the leaders in Lebanon as failures, and said: “Building the homeland cannot be carried out by militias, that were the reason for the nation’s entry into a bloody civil war, nor by tailoring departments and institutions to suit the sects and their leaders.”

Meanwhile, the Lebanese Army was deployed near the residence of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri over fears he could be targeted by protesters.

In recent days, groups have tracked down political and economic figures, following them to restaurants and cafes to protest, accusing them of theft, including former minister Adnan Kassar, the wife of the governor of the Banque du Liban, Nada Riad Salameh, and the secretary-general of the Future Movement, Ahmad Hariri.

Elsewhere, trade unions affiliated with the General Labor Union are set to go on strike next Wednesday in rejection of any move to cut subsidies for basic goods.

Union leader, Bechara Al-Asmar, said on Saturday that “political conflicts do not bode well, but rather increase the tragedies of the Lebanese people. A minimum level of understanding is required to form a government that can handle the crises.”

In a report issued earlier this month, the World Bank warned in a report that “Lebanon is suffering from a dangerous depletion of resources, including human capital.”

The report highlighted that “a contraction of Lebanese GDP per capita in real terms and high inflation in 2020 will undoubtedly result in a substantial increase in poverty rates and will affect the population through different channels such as the loss of productive employment, decline in real purchasing power, and stalled international remittance.”



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Lebanon health crisis looms with drug stocks under threat

[New party seeks to divide Kurdish votes in Turkey, say experts](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-12-12 21:46

ANKARA: Following the formation of breakaway parties from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), a new political party has appeared on the Turkish domestic scene with pro-Kurdish credentials.

However, experts think the move is a ruse to take votes from the pro-minority Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – which will benefit the ruling government.

The newly formed Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), whose chair is Resit Akinci, will be the 92nd political party in Turkey.

The party is still waiting for the official approval of its registration, since having the word "Kurdish" in its name has always been contentious.

However, Turkish opposition figures are skeptical about the motives for founding a new Kurdish movement in Turkey when HDP continuously faces police crackdowns, with its former chairs and elected mayors still behind bars.

Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), said in an interview on Dec. 4: "The government is trying to found a second party and divide the HDP, since they could not lure the latter to their side." The KDP has denied this.

A Kurdish expert in Diyarbakir, who asked to remain anonymous, said the party is founded to support the electoral People's Alliance between the AKP and the right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) ahead of 2023, when the presidential and parliamentary elections will be held.

Savci Sayan, the AKP mayor of the eastern city of Agri, recently said that Kurds are set to establish a new party and will support People's Alliance.

"Those who stand against the HDP, those who reject terror, those who are conservative and support the unity of the country will establish a new party and will give their backing to People's Alliance. It is a fresh and certain information. Let's hope for the best," he tweeted on Nov. 18.

The party's chair claimed that KDP will appeal to the Kurdish conservative youth and will try to preserve a young profile. The party is set to open its first branch in the Kurdish-majority southeastern province of Diyarbakir on Dec. 14, opening further branches before the new year.

They hope to stand in elections in the near future.

"KDP will be politically in line with Mustafa al-Barzani's political thought. They don't have so many influential people in their ranks and they won't be able to break into the HDP electorate in key places in south-eastern region, such as Hakkari and Sirnak," the anonymous expert said.

Barzani was the great Kurdish military leader of the last century who tried to create an independent nation for the Kurds living on the borders of Iran, Iraq, and the Soviet Union.

Rojda Sahin, 32, a young Kurdish voter in Diyarbakir, confirms experts' assessments about the possible effect of such political formations.

"I think this party, like similar ones which were established in the past, will remain marginal in the eyes of Kurdish youth. We are smart enough to see the underlying motives of such moves," she told Arab News. "We had never heard the name of the KDP chair until recently. No one knew him in local politics."



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[Intelligence experts say Iranian regime hackers targeted dissidents during online rally](#)

Sat, 2020-12-12 00:09

CHICAGO: The Iranian regime orchestrated a massive social-media campaign in an attempt to disrupt and discredit an online conference of dissidents, according to a report published on Friday.

The July 17 event, thought to be the largest of its kind, called on the US, UN and EU to impose tougher sanctions on Tehran. It was organized by opposition groups the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) and the National Council of Resistance of Iran.

The participants included more than 1,000 politicians and government

officials, including heads of state and foreign ministers. Prominent US political figures included former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and US Senator Joseph Lieberman.

The report was compiled by Treadstone 71, a cyber and threat intelligence consultancy. It said that hackers known as Basij Cyber Units (BCU), a paramilitary wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), aimed to "drown out" the voices on social media calling for regime change in Iran by creating thousands of fake accounts.

Experts at the company, which specializes in monitoring Iranian cyber and influence operations and researches hacker groups, said that during the conference they spotted "highly unusual spikes in social-media activity that, at first glance, seemed random."

Analysis showed "that at least 35 to 45 percent of accounts participated in this campaign from inside Iran, non-inclusive of the likely Iranian participants using VPNs (virtual private networks) and proxies." VPNs and proxies are commonly used to disguise a user's geographic location.

The report continued: "The Revolutionary Guards Cyber Unit (RGCU) led the well-organized influence operations. According to the data, nearly 46 percent of accounts engaged in the campaign were fake and spam accounts."

The authors stated that 26,431 social-media accounts were used in the campaign, of which 11,294 were fake or "low-follower" accounts that had been newly created or were previously dormant.



The July 17 event, thought to be the largest of its kind, called on the US, UN and EU to impose tougher sanctions on Tehran. It was organized by opposition groups the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) and the National Council of Resistance of Iran. (Supplied/NCRI)

"The RGPU enrolled 1,622 Twitter accounts in June and July, within one month of the online conference," according to the report. Immediately after the conference, 3,453 of the accounts were deleted and 1,168 became inactive. The campaign also used "bots," automated programs that can automatically search the internet for specific data.

The BCU is known to have created hundreds of thousands of fake Twitter accounts, hacked social-media accounts, disrupted and vandalized websites, and stolen information from anti-regime activists.

PMOI/MEK spokesman Shahin Gobadi, who is based in Paris, said the report is proof that Iran's leaders fear the organization and shows why the regime must be sanctioned.

"Since its inception, Iran's clerical regime has been engaged in a massive demonization and disinformation campaign against its opponents, particularly the main resistance group: the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, the MEK," he said.

"The demonization campaign has been part and parcel of its terror machine inside and outside of Iran. As such, the mullahs have devoted massive amounts of resources and manpower to the dissemination of lies and slander against the MEK in the cybersphere over the years."

Gobadi said the report confirms what the world already knows: "The main source of lies and allegations against the MEK is the clerical regime – and specifically the MOIS and the IRGC, both of which have elaborate sections devoted to cyber activities."

The dissident conference prompted condemnations of the brutality of the Iranian regime and its acts of terrorism. The speakers included human rights activists Ingrid Betancourt and Linda Chavez, along with representatives from the European, German, French and Italian parliaments.



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Two years after failed bomb plot, Iranian opposition rallies backers online
Iran opposition group calls for regime change in Paris march

[Bahraini non-profit brings mother nature to the boardroom](#)

Fri, 2020-12-11 23:29

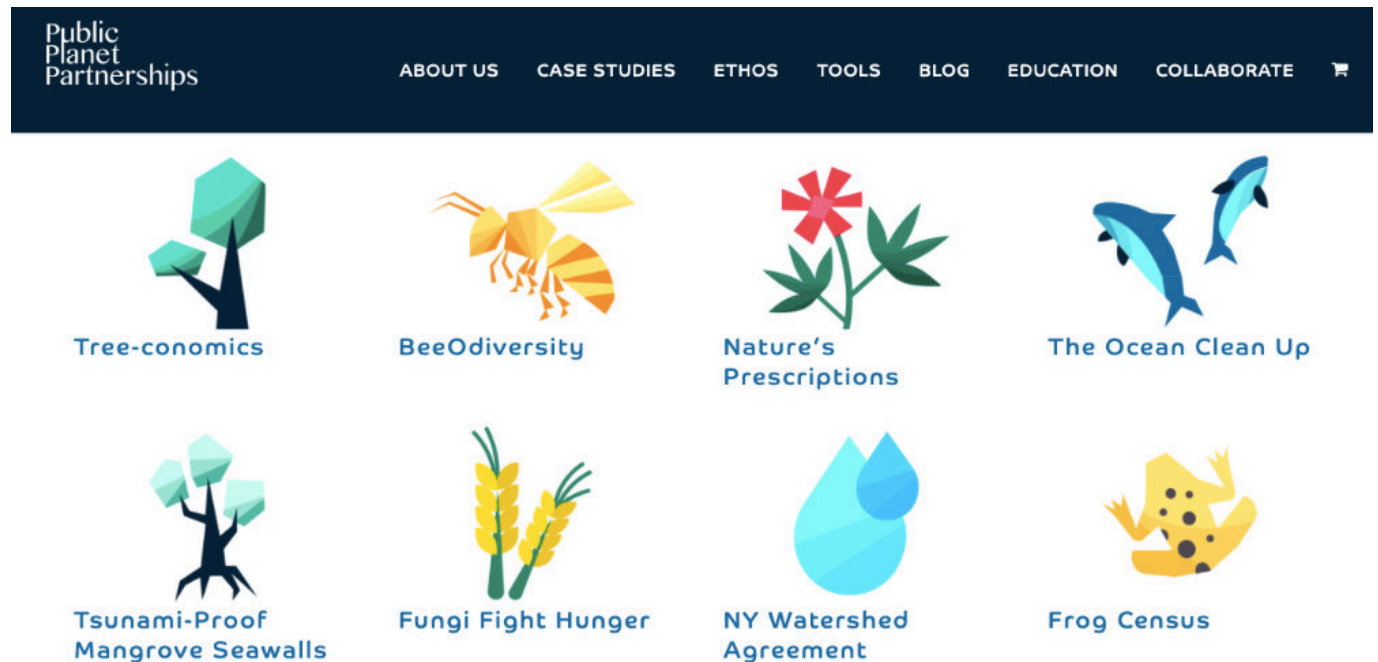
MANAMA: The scientific and technological advances of the last 150 years have left humanity even more remote from the natural world, as exploitation of natural resources and profits are arguably prioritized over environmental protection.

Leena Al-Olaimy, a Bahraini social entrepreneur, has made it her mission to reset the paradigm, launching non-profit Public Planet Partnerships (PPP) to train businesses how to “team up” with nature to operate more efficiently and boost their bottom line.

“We see nature as something to protect or exploit, unfortunately. But we

don't see it as something to collaborate with as a socio-economic partner," Al-Olaimy said.

The World Bank values earth's natural assets at \$100 trillion. For instance, California's street trees annually provide \$1 billion in services by regulating the atmosphere and preventing floods, but such contributions are usually overlooked in conventional economics.



The PPP model offers a step-by-step methodology enabling mutually beneficial collaborations between humans and the natural world. (Supplied)

So, Al-Olaimy's PPP model offers an ethos and step-by-step methodology enabling mutually beneficial and regenerative collaborations between humans and the natural world.

"We'd like to see PPP become widely used, so any new or existing business, NGO or government department would look at this framework and find it easy to implement," she said.

By public, Al-Olaimy means businesses, multilateral organizations, scientists, governments and civil society. By planet, she means all life on earth and its vast resources.

PPP's open-source tools combine design-thinking, management consulting and spiritual ecology with a science-based approach. With around 20 downloadable tools, organizations can gain unique insights, from reframing nature to see it as a technology to connecting with nature at an intuitive level. These toolkits are available in English, Arabic and French.

IN NUMBER

- \$100,000 Expo Live grant received by PPP to expand its case study library.

PPP's co-founders piloted its program at COP22, the UN's 2016 climate change conference in Marrakech. PPP also received a \$100,000 Expo Live grant to develop its methodology and toolkit and expand its case study library.

"We wanted to create a planet-centered toolkit that anyone could use and was accessible," says Al-Olaimy. "Most environmental frameworks are technical, so we set out to create something that would be easy to understand for everyone – from a changemaker to an entrepreneur, corporate innovator or government official."

Her 12 partnership models include using nature as a sensor, a data partner, a waste manager, a purifier and a protector. For instance, the incredible sense of smell of giant pouched rats enables them to detect landmines and identify tuberculosis in human mucus samples.

"That's an example of looking at what's available to you and seeing the superpowers that particular species can offer you," said Al-Olaimy. "These partnerships should be a win-win, so we'd also look at the threats to that rat species and see how to mitigate these to ensure they thrive."



Leena Al-Olaimy, Bahraini social entrepreneur

A PPP bootcamp takes an organization through a three-stage process. This begins with planet centering to reconnect with nature at a tactile, sensory and intuitive level. Phase two is "discovery," where participants examine the available biological resources in their environment and identify potential ecological and species partners, as well as the non-human stakeholders. This phase determines the best bio strategies to adopt, while the final phase is planet partnering.

"We create an inventory of the species available to you and the things these

species do that could be useful to your business or organization,” Al-Olaimy said. “We help you experiment – if you were to partner with this species as a data partner, how would that work? Or with another species as a nourisher, what would that entail?”

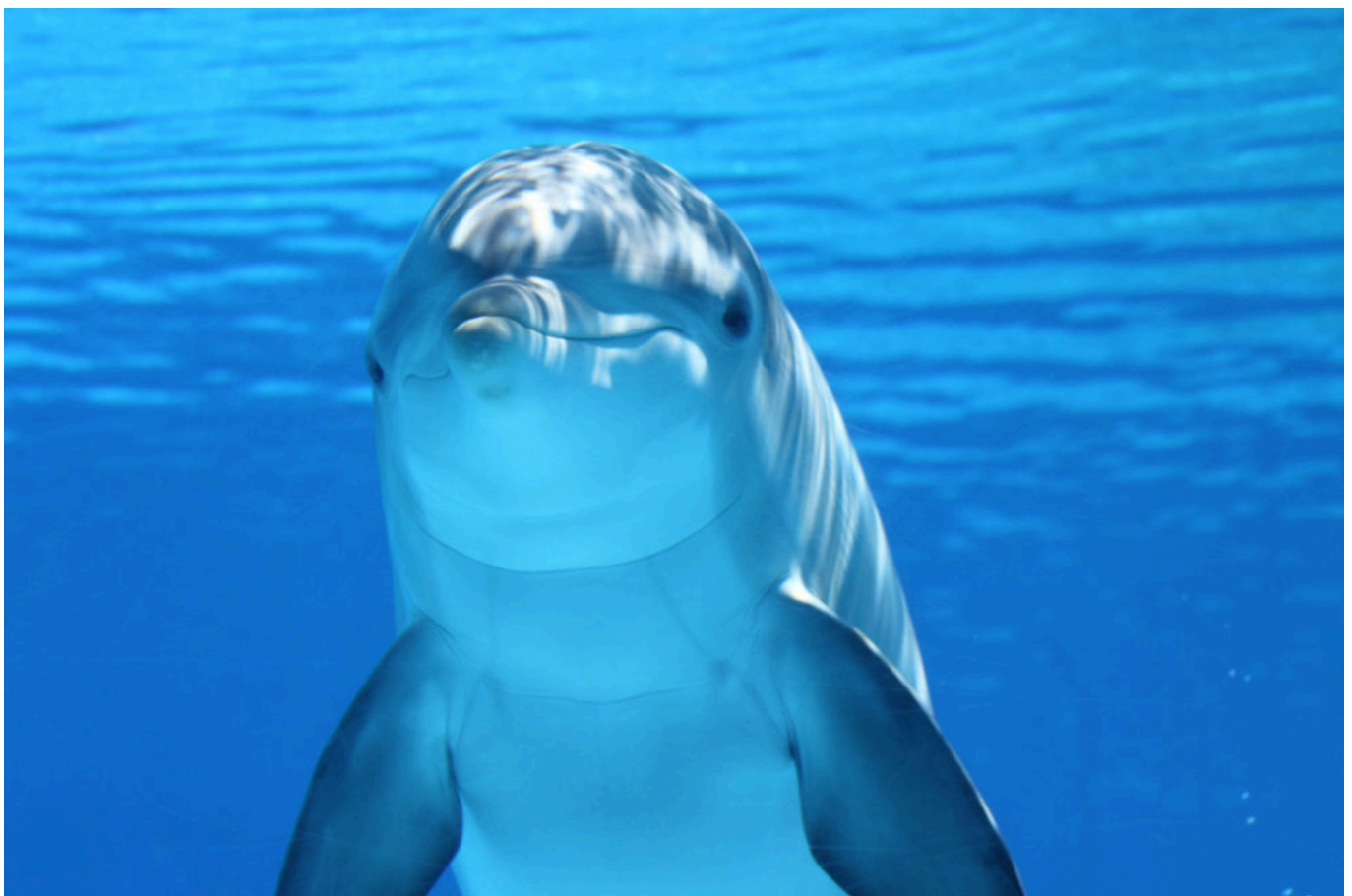
“Once you have an idea, you need to develop a business case. You’d probably need an environmental economist to quantify the costs, for example, but the ideation process can be done by anyone.”

Professionals from more than 40 countries have used the toolkit. “Most of the traction we’ve had has been with design thinkers, sustainability professionals, environmental NGOs,” Al-Olaimy said.

Meanwhile, PPP’s Udemy course is available in English and has been completed by 154 students as of mid-September 2020.

“I’ve been pleasantly surprised and encouraged by the traction we’ve had,” she said.

• This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.





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[Government and separatist forces withdraw from flashpoint in Abyan, Yemen](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-12-11 23:33

AL-MUKALLA: The internationally recognized government of Yemen and the pro-independence, separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) began withdrawing their forces on Friday from a flashpoint in the southern province of Abyan, military officers from both sides told Arab News.

The latest redeployment of forces from contested areas in southern Yemen is part of the power-sharing Riyadh Agreement, which was designed to end hostilities between the two sides.

Alongside images of Saudi officers supervising the withdrawal of forces, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed Al-Jaber tweeted on Friday: "Our

brave heroes from the Coordination and Political Liaison Team, the leadership and officers of the coalition forces, are hand in hand with the leaders and officers of the legitimate forces and the Southern Transitional Council to implement the agreement.”

Troops were seen on Friday afternoon leaving their positions in the contested Sheikh Salem area – under the supervision of Saudi officers – and heading towards a military base in the government-controlled Lawder district.

“The army has pulled out military units that are not part of the Abyan Axis from Sheikh Salem to Mukayras,” one army officer, who asked to remain anonymous, told Arab News by telephone.

The STC also announced the withdrawal of forces from Sheikh Salem to Aden and the shifting of another military brigade from Aden to Karesh in Lahj, a move that Mohammed Al-Naqeeb, a spokesperson for the STC forces in Abyan, told Arab News was intended to reinforce anti-Houthi forces.

“We are committed to our partnership with the (Arab) coalition and we thank them for their peace efforts,” Al-Naqeeb said, adding that the remaining military forces in Abyan would be withdrawn in phases.

On Thursday, the coalition announced that its forces in southern Yemen would monitor the separation of forces in contested areas in Abyan province and Aden and their redeployment to fight the Houthis.

Under the Riyadh Agreement, the Yemeni government and STC would form a shared government and pull out of Aden and Abyan. Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi would appoint a new prime minister and a new governor and security chief for Aden. The implementation of the agreement has been drawn out by political wrangling over which should come first, the announcement of the new government or the withdrawal of forces.

The coalition’s latest statement was widely seen as a major breakthrough in the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. Once security and military arrangements are agreed, Prime Minister-designate Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed will announce his cabinet, composed of 24 ministers with equal representation from both sides.

In Riyadh, government and STC sources told Arab News on Friday that Saeed has chosen his ministers and will likely announce his new government once military forces have completed their withdrawal.

Yemeni politicians and analysts said that the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement would unite forces against the Houthis and would help overcome issues including crumbling infrastructure and services and a falling currency.

Former prime minister Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr, a senior adviser to the Yemeni president, said he sees serious progress towards the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. On Thursday, he tweeted: “The Houthis are our common enemy.”

The Houthis have exploited the rift between the Yemeni government and the STC to make territorial gains in several areas. "Since August 2019, efforts against the Houthis have dispersed and the economy has collapsed as important military commanders have been killed in the fighting between the government and the STC," Yasser Al-Yafae, a political analyst based in Aden, told Arab News.

But Al-Yafae and other analysts predict that the redeployment of forces from Abyan and Aden to fight the Houthis will lead to military success.



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Saudi ambassador to Yemen says Riyadh Agreement will fulfill peace, security and stabilityUS accuses Houthis in Yemen of 'behaving like a terrorist organization'