

Restructuring Yemen's Military Leadership

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Synopsis: This article seeks to contextualize the main challenges in reunifying and restructuring Yemen's military leadership in the post-Ali Abdullah Saleh era.

The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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INTRO

A recent article explaining differences in the first phase of 'Arab Spring' outcomes divides countries into three groups, based on the actions of the national military. On one end of the spectrum are Tunisia and Egypt, where the military brass refused to suppress popular protests by force; on the other are Syria and Bahrain, where the military largely remained loyal to the regime; in between are Libya and Yemen, where the army split.¹ There are many reasons for these divergences; one influential interpretation focuses on level of popular mobilization and degree of military institutionalization as the two factors explaining the behavior of the militaries.² More institutionalized armies, such as the Egyptian and Tunisian, are considered more likely to defect from the regime when faced with a popular uprising. Highly patrimonial armies, ultimately loyal to the ruling family or clique, are on the other hand less likely to defect under such circumstances.

Somewhere in the middle of this continuum we find Yemen's security and military services, precariously leading the country into the new and uncertain post-Saleh era. Yemen's political class has suffered a deep and public split but the dreaded civil war has not materialized. The country's formula of "pluralized authoritarianism,"³ where power is shared at a broader level than in most other "Arab Spring" countries, has likely played a role in this regard. The country's most challenging political task will likely be how best to reform and restructure the country's national security institutions. Ali Abdullah Saleh may have renounced the presidency, but his and his family's influence is deeply embedded in the system.

The degree to which the president's family, as of late 2011, is in control of key security institutions is astounding. These include the Republican Guard and Special Forces (the president's son and one-time purported heir Ahmed), the Central Security Forces (nephew Yahya Mohammed Saleh), the National Security Bureau (nephew Ammar Mohammed Saleh), the Air Force (half-brother Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar), and the Presidential Guard (his nephew Tariq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh).⁴ His younger son Khaled Ali Abdullah Saleh was put in charge of a newly created division shortly after graduating from Sandhurst. His nephew Tayseer

¹ Zoltan Barany, "The Role of the Military," *Journal of Democracy* 22:4 (2011), pp. 24-35.

² Eva Bellin, "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring," *Comparative Politics*, 44:2 (2012), pp. 127-149.

³ Sarah Phillips, *Yemen's Democracy Experiment in Regional Perspective: Patronage and Pluralized Authoritarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴ For more see "A Republic or a Kingdom?," *Adenpress*, February 10, 2010. Available at http://www.adenpress.com/eng/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=106:a-republic-or-a-kingdom&catid=30:2010-01-06-16-25-31&Itemid=56 (accessed January 24, 2012).

Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar is the military attaché in Washington. Other relatives and kinsmen hold important political, economic and military leadership positions.

The inner circle of power also includes members of Saleh's village, his tribe, and unrelated loyal military commanders. It is here that the regime first began fraying, when in March 2011 Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, the president's longtime right-hand military man, defected from the regime and announced that his troops would now protect protesters. Further splits have taken place at a slightly broader level of inner power,⁵ one that includes selected elites from Yemen's main tribal confederations and its religious establishment. The leaders of Yemen's most powerful tribal clan, the sons of deceased Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, are at the forefront of this opposition.

THE MILITARY AND YEMENI UNIFICATION

The 1990 unification of North and South Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic [YAR] and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen [PDRY] respectively) was by all accounts a remarkable political achievement, although in many ways cosmetic, more an "amalgamation" than an "integration."⁶ Among the crucial institutions to resist full integration was the national military, with leadership on both sides opposing a unified command structure. The initial compromise called for deploying army divisions from the north in the south and vice-versa. Thus, five southern brigades were stationed in relative proximity to the capital Sana'a, while an elite northern brigade was stationed in Abyan and another in Lahj province; in addition, over a thousand officers from the North's Central Security were stationed in the former southern capital of Aden.⁷

It was not long, though, before the challenges of rapid and effective institutional integration began to test the unity of the new state. The militaries remained divided, and political disagreements threatened to spill over into the battlefield. In April 1994 civil war erupted following a tank battle between northern and southern troops stationed in 'Amran province. Surprisingly, it took the smaller northern troops only a few days to destroy the southern armored brigade with which they shared a base.⁸ Over the next two months, both sides used airpower and heavy artillery against the others' military positions.

⁵ Sara Phillips maps elite influences in the Saleh regime in three concentric circles. See Sarah Phillips, "Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis, Chapter Five: The Regime," *Adelphi Series* 51:420 (2011), pp. 87-104.

⁶ Michael Hudson, "Bipolarity, Rational Calculation and War in Yemen," in Jamal S. al-Suwaidi (ed.), *The Yemeni War of 1994: Causes and Consequences* (London: Saqi Books, 1995), p. 20. The Saleh government's narrative was of course different, seeing unification as a glorious and unshakable political achievement.

⁷ As Brian Whitaker recounts: "In the north, the Socialists had five brigades: the Third Armoured at Amran, 38 miles north of Sana'a, the Basahib at Dhamar, 60 miles south of the capital, the First Artillery at Yarim, a few miles further south, the Fourth Infantry at Kawlan and the Fifth Infantry at Harf Sufyan. The northern forces stationed in the south were the Amaliqah Brigade at Lawdar in Abyan province, the Second Armoured Brigade at al-Raha in Lahij province and Central Security near Aden airport." Brian Whitaker, *The Birth of Modern Yemen* (2009), e-book published at <http://www.al-bab.com/yemen/birthofmodernyemen> (accessed January 24, 2012), p. 174.

⁸ Whitaker, *The Birth of Modern Yemen*, p. 174-75.

Many southern brigades were quick to defect as southern control contracted; before long fighting became concentrated along Aden's two entry points, one the al-'Anad military base in the north (Lahj province) and the other in Abyan.⁹ After a month-long siege by northern troops and their southern allies, Aden was captured on July 7, effectively ending unified Yemen's brief civil war. Few had expected the north to prevail in a military confrontation.

Prior to unification, both North Yemen (YAR) and South Yemen (PDRY) were single-party states, ruled respectively by the General People's Congress (GPC) and the Yemen Socialist Party (YSP). The aftermath of the war saw the full dismantling of the YSP (Southern) military command, as northern leadership – headed by Ali Abdullah Saleh – moved to consolidate its power, particularly within the army and security forces.¹⁰ Many civil servants in the south were forced to retire, including large numbers of southern military commanders, who were replaced with northern leaders from Saleh's inner circle. The exception to this were southern leaders who had defected early – they were promoted.¹¹ The rhetoric of unity became the mantra of the new GPC-led government of the Republic of Yemen (ROY) and Ali Abdullah Saleh and his Sanhan kinsmen were the undisputed leaders of this government.

SUCCESSION POLITICS

Ali Abdullah Saleh's son Ahmed was thrust into the political limelight in the 1997 elections (the first following the 1994 civil war), when he was elected as a member of parliament representing the ruling party. Succession politics began in earnest in 1999, when President Saleh pushed for constitutional amendments allowing him to remain in power until 2013, presumably paving the way for his son Ahmed to subsequently take over. This move allegedly sparked a major dispute within the Sanhan elite. Saleh's kinsmen, who had helped him gain and retain power, saw the tribe rather than a single family as the ruler of Yemen. Mohammed Ismail al-Qadhi, the military commander of the Eastern Region from a prominent Sanhan family, was allegedly the most forthright in expressing his displeasure.¹²

⁹ Human Rights Watch/Middle East, *Yemen: Human Rights in Yemen During and After the 1994 War*, vol. 6, no. 5, October 1994, p.7. Available at <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/YEMEN94O.PDF> (accessed January 24, 2012). See also: 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Saqqaf, "A Politico-Military Analysis of Why Sanaa Won the War How the War was Won!" *Yemen Update* 35 (1994), pp. 12-13. Available at <http://www.aiys.org/no-35-1994/125-a-politico-military-analysis-of-why-sanaa-won-the-war-how-the-war-was-won.html> (accessed January 24, 2012).

¹⁰ This, along with the looting by northerners and their attempt to take over land and assets in the south, would sow the seeds of the resentment and secessionist southern movement of 2007. See Stephen Day, "Updating Yemeni National Unity: Could Lingering Regional Divisions Bring Down the Regime?" *Middle East Journal*, v. 62 no. 3, Summer 2008

¹¹ A prominent example of the latter is Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi, Yemen's vice-president (and acting president while President Saleh was being treated in Saudi Arabia and under the GCC-brokered plan), who was a southern commander when the civil war broke out that was named defense minister by Saleh early in the war (in May) and vice president after it. From the North's perspective he "sided with Yemeni unity."

¹² This account, based on anonymous sources, is given in Sarah Phillips, "Yemen and the Politics of Permanent Crisis," p. 97.

In August 1999, a helicopter carrying al-Qadhi, Deputy Chief of Staff Ahmad Faraj, and other military commanders crashed shortly after taking off in the province of Hadramawt. The crash was officially ruled an accident. The Republican Guard quickly moved in to take over some of the bases on the capital's outskirts that had been under the control of the Eastern Command. The following year, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh replaced his uncle, Ali Saleh al-Ahmar, as head of the Republican Guard.

In 2004, Yemeni forces became embroiled in a growing insurgency led by followers and tribal allies of the Huthi clan in the unruly and rugged northern province of Saada. From the outset Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar and his 1st Armored Division were charged with containing the rebellion.¹³ For six long years they failed, and not until 2010, after the Saudi Arabian military intervened in support of the Yemeni government, did the fighting finally die down.

The main political victim of the nearly decade-long fighting was Ali Muhsin and his 1st Division. Many observers saw the war as unwinnable, a trap meant to weaken Muhsin's troops and dislodge them from their bases in Sanaa. The true battle, some surmised, was between the 1st Armored Division and the Republican Guard, with the Houthis mere proxies.¹⁴ During the later stages of the war the Republican Guard took over many positions outside the capital formerly held by Muhsin's division, whose base was moved to 'Amran, north of the capital, so it could better focus on the Houthis.¹⁵ In a further move to consolidate control over the capital, in January 2011 the president announced the creation of a new "mountain infantry division," to be headed by his younger son Khaled. The new formation was seen as a direct rival to al-Ahmar's decimated division; two of the new division's three brigades were stationed in strategic points on the outskirts of the capital.¹⁶

CONTROLLING SECURITY

Particularly following 9/11, military training and equipment in Yemen have increasingly been channeled to forces headed by the president's relatives and directly under his command. These elite forces are used to protect key state infrastructure, to guard the capital, and to keep provincial capitals under control. Some of them are also intended to be highly mobile and rapidly deployable. Falling outside of the military chain of command, these forces are a virtual parallel military. Foremost among them are the Republican Guard (30,000 to 40,000) and Special Forces

¹³ Ali Muhsin was seen as Saleh's right-hand man until he split from the government in the Spring of 2010. He is also from Sanhan and thought to have good relations within the military and with various tribes. He is often referred to as "Yemen's second most powerful figure."

¹⁴ See for instance Mounir al-Maury, *Al-Yaman wa al-Raqs 'ala R'us al-Th'abin* (Beirut: Bissan, 2009).

¹⁵ Despite their reputation as "elite forces," Republican Guard forces have at times had trouble dealing with (and sometimes been roundly defeated by) lightly-armed tribal militias, including in areas on the outskirts of the capital Sanaa (Bani Hushaysh and Nihm).

¹⁶ "Al-Ra'is Saleh yansha' Quwa 'Askariya Jadida wa yusalim Qiyadatiha li-Najlih al-Asghar al-'Aqid Khaled," *Al-Masdar Online*, January 29, 2011. Available at http://almasdaronline.com/index.php?page=news&article-section=1&news_id=15590 (accessed January 24, 2012).

(7,000 to 12,000). Along with the Special Guard (2,000 and 3,000 Special Forces soldiers), they represent the backbone of the regime's defenses. Since protests began the Republican Guard and other loyalist troops have regulated entry into the capital, taken on al-Qaeda-linked militants in the east of the country, and fought tribal militias on the outskirts of Sanaa (Nihm and Arhab), as well as Taiz and other parts of the country.¹⁷

The other principal regime bulwark during the protests – also accused of acting with a heavy hand – are the Central Security Forces (CSF), the well-equipped paramilitary force (around 40,000) headed by the president's nephew Yahya. The CSF is part of the Central Security Organization, created in 1980 and tasked with protecting and securing the main cities and vital state facilities, among others. The U.S.-trained counterterrorism squad is under this organization.¹⁸ The organization is highly centralized and has not suffered from significant defections.¹⁹

The country's two main intelligence agencies, on the other hand, have for years been locked in a low-level internecine battle. The older of the two is the Political Security Organization (PSO), created by presidential decree in 1992. Following the 2000 *USS Cole* attacks, suggestions were made of complicity between high-ranking PSO members and jihadis.²⁰ Partly in response, in 2002 the National Security Bureau (NSB) was created and one of Saleh's nephews was made deputy director. The NSB helped "provide Western intelligence agencies with a more palatable local partner than the PSO."²¹ At the same time, it helped counter the PSO, which had acquired a degree of institutional independence; the creation of a smaller, more personalized intelligence agency allowed the president to keep a closer eye on things.²² The overlapping intelligence agencies, a classic "coup-proofing" measure,²³ have fought over Yemeni assets abroad, the

¹⁷ They have been accused of disproportionate use of force in these areas.

¹⁸ United States Congressional Research Service, *Yemen: Background and U.S. Relations*, January 13, 2010, RL34170. Available at <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/137261.pdf> (accessed January 24, 2012).

¹⁹ This is not to say that there have been no defections or divisions, only that leadership remains fairly well centralized with Yahya Saleh.

²⁰ For instance the case of Abd al-Salam Ali al-Hila, a PSO officer accused of being an al-Qaeda facilitator who was captured in Cairo in 2002 and taken to Guantanamo.

²¹ Michael Knights, "Strengthening Yemeni Counterterrorism Forces: Challenges and Political Considerations," Policywatch #1616, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 6, 2010. Available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3158> (accessed January 24, 2012).

²² The NSB's director is Ali Al-Anasi, the head of the presidential office (chief of staff) while its deputy director is the president's nephew Ammar. The agency is rooted in the "information agency" that once existed within the presidential office

²³ James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24:2 (1999), p. 133. The author mentions four other measures: taking advantage of family, ethnic, and religious loyalties in critical positions; creating an armed force parallel to the national army; fostering expertness in the regular military; and, financing the coup-proofing measures.

Somalia file, and responsibility for airport security, among others. The two are also embroiled in a game of accusing one another of complicity with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).²⁴

CONCLUSION

Over the past dozen years Ali Abdullah Saleh and his inner circle have tightened their grip on Yemen's security and military apparatus, whether by controlling traditional institutions or creating parallel ones fully under their control, often under the guise of containing the threat of AQAP. This may complicate the construction of a strong and viable state, if such a thing is possible in Yemen. The resilience of Ali Abdullah Saleh's government is remarkable, especially in light of the quick government turnaround of the 1960s and 1970s in both North and South Yemen. The government, through Saleh's immediate kinsmen, is deeply embedded in the security apparatus underpinning the Yemeni state; dealing with this complication may be any transitional government's greatest challenge. In a collapsed Yemeni state, the new generation of the Saleh family (led by the president's sons and nephews) is likely to play a major role.²⁵

At the very least, the more institutionalized parts of Yemen's national army – although emasculated – will be able to function with relative institutional independence. Much of it has remained neutral, to the extent that it is possible. This for instance is the case with the Amalaqa (Giant) Brigade in Harf Sufyan,²⁶ once considered the Yemeni Army's greatest fighting brigade, as well the embattled 25th Mechanized Brigade, which was previously under siege by Sunni jihadists in Abyan.

Airpower has always been one of the state's primary domestic military advantages. It was a crucial determinant in 1994 and was used extensively against the Houthis from 2004 to 2010. More recently the government has used airpower in the Sanaa districts of Arhab and Nihm, as well as Zinjibar. Although the commanders of some air bases (al-Hudaydah) have defected, the main bases remain loyal and the Air Force Commander, Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar, is the president's half-brother. In early January 2012, at the time of writing, protests broke out within the Air Force calling for the resignation of Mohammed Saleh al-Ahmar, part of a broader trend in "institutional protests" that could either provide an opening for reform or bring the entire state apparatus down.

²⁴ Most prominent and consequential has been the case of Jaber al-Shabwani, who was killed by a drone while on his way to meet AQAP in mediation effort, in Wadi Abida. Some claim he was targeted because he could implicate the NSB with al-Qaeda. His powerful family retaliated by attacking Yemen's main oil pipeline and other installations on May 25, 2010.

²⁵ Although the protests that began in late February have put a new level of strain on the regime, their outbreak is fundamentally different than was the case in any of the other "Arab Spring" states, where large protests were unheard of. Major protests had been going on in Yemen for many years, especially among the "Southern Movement." The protests in many ways precipitated a looming succession crisis, which is now being resolved among the political elites, with the youth leading the protests largely sidelined from the political process.

²⁶ "Geografiya al-Harb al-Muhtamala fi-l Yemen," *Al-Masdar Online*, October 13, 2011. Available at http://www.almasdaronline.com/index.php?page=news&news_id=24506 (accessed January 24, 2012).

On December 4, 2011 acting Yemeni president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi formed a “Military Affairs Committee for Achieving Security and Stability” to help implement the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative, which provides the framework for a transition away from the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh. He himself chairs the committee, which includes fourteen other members, seven each from the opposition and the ruling party/government.²⁷ In addition to demobilizing armed groups, the committee is tasked with removing the various checkpoints and barricades set up by security and military forces (by the CSF, Republican Guard and the Ali Muhsin-led “Free Yemeni Army”) in various parts of the capital and the flashpoint city of Taiz, as well as restructuring military and security institutions during the two-year interim period following presidential elections. It is generally acknowledged that the committee’s main challenge will be to appear as a neutral arbiter with the authority and power to restructure the Republican Guard, CSF and other regime forces and incorporate them into the traditional chain of command through the cabinet ministries.²⁸

Yemenis facetiously say that the letters of Ali Abdullah Saleh’s Sanhan tribe stand for “saufa nahkum hata akhar nufus” (we will rule until our last breath). Although Ali Abdullah Saleh may have exonerated himself from this castigation, we must now wait and see whether his sons and nephews – deeply entrenched in Yemen’s military and security establishment – believe they can rule and breathe at the same time.

²⁷ The membership (in Arabic) is available here: <http://www.alsahwa-yemen.net/arabic/subjects/1/2011/12/4/14408.htm>

²⁸ Saleh loyalists are likely to be the initial scapegoats. Some have been replaced, such as Taiz security chief Abdullah Qairan.