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# The Restructuring of the Yemeni Army

Adil al-Shurbagi | June 2013

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Series: Policy Analysis

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## Abstract

On March 21, 2011, 40 days after the outbreak of the youth revolution in Yemen, General Ali Muhsin Saleh al-Ahmar, commander of the Northeastern region and the First Armored Division, Brigadier Muhammad Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, commander of the Eastern region, and a number of other senior officers declared their support for the Yemeni Revolution. As a result, the Yemeni Army found itself divided into two armies, “the pro-revolution army” and “the family army,” as labeled by the revolutionary forces, indicating the latter’s link to Ali Abdullah Saleh’s family. These developments exposed the hidden split within the army, spiraling these divisions to the point of no return. The capital Sanaa and a number of other Yemeni cities subsequently witnessed clashes between these two armies, and between their respective militias, leading the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative to include a specific article addressing the unification and restructuring of the army, putting an end to its division.

This paper seeks to explain the achievements behind the recent restructuring of the Yemeni Army, focusing on its approach, challenges posed, tasks that are yet to be fulfilled, and the effect each of these factors has on national unity, social cohesion, and the building of trust between the participating parties in Yemen’s National Dialogue Conference\*. Recommendations presented in the report are meant to help the representatives of the armed forces and security in the National Dialogue Conference in preparing a vision and a roadmap for the success of this restructuring.

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\* Yemen’s National Dialogue Conference is an initiative calling for dialogue between Yemen’s main stakeholders, with the aim of drafting a new constitution and preparing for full democratic elections in February 2014. More than 500 representatives of various political groups are taking part in the discussions in Sanaa as this paper goes to print, a process that is expected to last six months.

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## Background on the Division and Structural Weakness of the Yemeni Army

Since his arrival to power in July 17, 1978, former president Ali Abdullah Saleh sought to appoint low-ranking officers from his tribe (*Sanhan*) to the helm of most military units, mostly in the capacity of majors.<sup>2</sup> As a result, army officers from Sanhan occupied 70 percent of the commanding posts in military and security institutions, though the tribe itself roughly represents no more than 1 percent of the Yemeni population. At the time, former president Saleh sealed an unwritten agreement with his Sanhani supporters by decreeing that he will be replaced by Major Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar in the event of his assassination or death.<sup>3</sup>

After the unification of North and South Yemen and the announcement of the establishment of the Yemeni Republic on May 22, 1990, the two state's respective armies remained separate. According to writer Khaled Fattah, "The Republican Guard constituted one of the controversial questions between the General People's Conference (GPC) and the Yemeni Socialist Party after unification; the Popular Conference wished to keep the Republican Guard under the direct command of the president, while the Yemeni Socialist Party (representing the authority in former Southern Yemen) wanted the Republican Guard to be under the direct responsibility of the minister of defense,

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<sup>2</sup> These included the president's half-brother, Major Ali Saleh al-Ahmar, commander of the Republican Guard; his brother Major Muhammad Abdullah Saleh, who commanded Central Security; Major Muhammad Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, commander of the Air Defense; Major Muhammad Khaleel, commander of the Fourth Armored Brigade; Major Saleh al-Zannin, commander of the Second Armored Brigade; Major Muhammad Nasir Sanhub, commander of the Third Armored Brigade; Major Ali Muhsin Saleh al-Ahmar, commander of the First Armored Brigade; Major Abd al-Ilah al-Qadi, commander of the Reinforced Third Infantry Brigade; Major Abdullah Faraj, commander of the Reinforced 130<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade; Major Ahmad Faraj, commander of the Khaled Camp; Major Muhammad Ismaeel, commander of the Eighth Special Forces Brigade; Major-Colonel Ahmad Ismaeel Ali Abu Huriya, commander of the 56<sup>th</sup> Brigade; and Major Mahdi Maqula, commander of the First Infantry Brigade. At a later stage, the president's half-brother, Major Muhammad Saleh al-Ahmar, was appointed commander of the air force. See: Muhsin Khasruf, "The Yemeni Army: its Creation, Evolution, and Pathways for the Future," *al-Jazeera Studies Center*, on the following link: <http://studies.aljazeera.net/reports/2012/07/20127308279666699.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> ICG, "Yemen's Military-Security Reform," p. 2.

fearing the potentiality of the division of the army.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that both parties signed the “Pact and Reconciliation Document,” which included an article on the integration and rebuilding of the armed forces,<sup>5</sup> the former president—after his victory in the 1994 civil war in Yemen<sup>6</sup>—decided to disband the Southern army, forcing the majority of its officers and soldiers into retirement before reaching retirement age, and confiscate its weapons and infrastructure. In this manner, Ali Abdullah Saleh began strengthening the Republican Guard and building the so-called “family army”.

In 1999, Ali Abdullah Saleh started to show clear signs of bequeathing power to his son. He began by pushing constitutional amendments that would allow him to stay in power until 2013 as a preface for the transfer of the presidency to his eldest son. This angered the Sanhani tribe military elite, who had enabled Saleh to stay in power from the time he entered the presidential palace in 1978. The officers argued that the president wanted to build a familial rule at the expense of the Sanhani leadership. At the time, Brigadier Muhammad Ismaeel al-Qadi, commander of the Eastern Military Region, was the most frank in expressing his discontent.<sup>7</sup> In August 1999, Brigadier al-Qadi, along with Brigadier Ahmad Faraj and other senior officers, was killed in a helicopter crash in Hadramout.

Between 2000 and 2011, the former president formed a new generation of Sanhani officers, including his eldest son and a number of his nephews from his brothers and half-brothers. Many of them were appointed as Republican Guard Brigades leadership, whose command was given to the president’s eldest son, Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh. As a result, the Yemeni Army became divided into two separate armies: an army supportive of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and his son General Ahmad—taking in the Republican Guard, the special forces, the anti-terrorism units, the air force, the Air

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<sup>4</sup> Fattah, “A Political History,” p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> For further details on the Pact and Reconciliation Document See: *The Dialogue between Political Forces for the Building of the Modern Yemeni State, the Pact and Reconciliation Document* (in Arabic) (Sanaa: al-Thawri publications, January 1994), pp. 23-25.

<sup>6</sup> The May–July 1994 civil war in Yemen was waged between the armed forces of the former Northern and Southern Yemeni states and their supporters. The war resulted in the defeat of the southern armed forces and the flight into exile of many Yemeni Socialist Party leaders and other southern secessionists

<sup>7</sup> Winter, “Restructuring Yemen’s Military Leadership,” p. 3.

Defense Command (led by Brigadier Muhammad Saleh al-Ahmar, Ali Abdullah Saleh's half-brother), and a few brigades that were formally affiliated to the Ministry of Defense, but were under the command of young Sanhani officers. On the other side of the spectrum, a separate Yemeni Army supported General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, including the brigades of the First Armored Division and the Northeastern Military Region and the brigades of the Eastern region under the command of Brigadier Muhammad Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar.

The former president worked to strengthen the Republican Guard and its affiliated units, making it into a force that included more than thirty brigades, while simultaneously seeking to weaken those led by the first generation of Sanhani officers. Between 2004 and 2010, Saleh implicated the forces of Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar in six wars against the Huthis in Saada and Amran, attempting to weaken these units.<sup>8</sup> According to a US diplomatic telegram published through Wiki Leaks, Saleh reportedly attempted to murder Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar during the Sixth Huthi War in 2009, by providing the Saudi Air Force, partakers in the Huthi war, with coordinates for his field command post, presenting them as coordinates for a Huthi forces hideout.<sup>9</sup>

Ali Abdullah Saleh considered the Yemeni Army his personal property, and not that of the homeland.<sup>10</sup> Such conduct was indeed possible in the absence of any type of law regulating the armed forces or the Ministry of Defense, which facilitated Saleh's efforts to prevent the institutionalization of the armed forces and their independence from his authority. At the time, former president Saleh was in charge of determining the number of soldiers, the recruitment methods and standards, the regions new recruits came from, and the regions in which the military units were to be deployed. He routinely issued orders promoting armed forces officers without abiding by the legal conditions surrounding such promotions. He also issued orders granting civilians military ranks and salaries within the armed forces, and disbursed weapons, vehicles and supplies from the stores of the armed forces. It was also not uncommon for him to grant some tribal elders the right to enroll numbers of their tribesmen (sometimes in the hundreds or thousands) in the army, while issuing commands to appoint the sons of the tribal chiefs

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<sup>8</sup> Phillips, *Politics of Permanent Crisis*, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> Ali, "'Rebel' General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar," 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Winter, p. 10.

as commanders of military units. As a result, the relationship between some army units began to resemble tribal relations with the sheikh of the tribe, or his son, typically being the leader of the military unit, and the majority of its soldiers being from among his supporters and clansmen.<sup>11</sup>

General Ali Muhsin dealt with the brigades under his command in a similar fashion, leading to an inflation in the number of army officers, particularly given that employment in the army was seen as an attractive choice by the tribesmen. Employment in the army did not require them to hold office hours, or be physically present in their military units. These fictive jobs abounded due to the rampant corruption within the military. A soldier could avoid serving in his unit in exchange for paying a portion of his salary to his commanding officer; thus, historically, many of the Yemeni army's brigades were staffed with a third or half of their actual strength.<sup>12</sup> Some sources estimate that "fictive soldiers" represented a third of the total strength of the armed forces.<sup>13</sup>

Division within the ranks of the army and continuous competition between the two poles of the military institution were among the main factors that led to the weakening of the army and the dilapidation of its professionalism. Commanders of military units were chosen on the basis of loyalty, rather than competence and experience.<sup>14</sup> In order to preserve the balance between the two centers of power within the army, those reaching the legal retirement age were not retired, and the senior positions had not been alternated, leading some officers to remain in service for more than forty years, while other commanders were at the heads of their units for more than three decades. On the other hand, the command of some army brigades was handed over to young officers in their twenties, such as Khalid Ali Abdullah Saleh, one of the sons of the former president who was granted the rank of colonel immediately after graduating from the military academy, and was handed the command of a mountain infantry division.

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<sup>11</sup> Abdah al-Absi, "Yemeni journalist dangerous and secret dossiers," 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Knights, "The Military Role," p. 6

<sup>13</sup> USAID, "Yemen Corruption Assessment," p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> ACRPS, "The Army and Popular Revolution in Yemen," p. 2.



Both centers of power within the military apparatus attempted to strike alliances with irregular groups. For instance, General Ali Muhsin became allied with the Salafist groups and the Yemeni Coalition for Reform, as well as some senior tribal chiefs. Similarly, he exploited his position as leader of the Northwestern region and commander of the First Armored Division to build networks of patronage and dispense salaries to thousands of tribal figures.<sup>15</sup> Ali Abdullah Saleh, instead, allied himself with some Jihadi organizations and with Ansar al-Sharia (perceived by some as one of al-Qaida's wings) while absorbing members of Jihadi organizations and similar Islamic organizations within the army. Thus, instead of the army contributing to state-building and social cohesion, it became one of the factors of social fragmentation and a contributor to the deepening of the vertical social cleavages in Yemeni society. Due to these policies, a secessionist movement emerged in the South. The politicization of the armed forces and the fragmentation of the southern army led to the military retirees being among the pioneering forces that established the peaceful Southern Movement in 2007, and the Association of Military Retirees was the first association to be established on a regional basis after 17 years of Yemeni unity. The military retirees and the proponents of the Southern Movement initially began their activism by asking for their rights. However, due to misguided policies, some of the movement's factions began demanding southern secession in 2009.

Saleh's policies toward the southern army created a schism in national unity, and social fragmentation was increased due to the policy of weakening the units commanded by Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, which were involved in the six wars against the Ansar Allah group (the Huthis) in Saada and nearby provinces. All of these factors have led to the re-emergence of sectarian tendencies and conflicts in the Northern provinces. Meanwhile, military confrontations increased between the various groups of political Islam, which were supported and pinned against each other by the two poles of the military establishment; in other instances, these extremist groups engaged in battle with the Yemeni army itself. Each of the power centers within the military was attempting to weaken the military units that were loyal to the other side.<sup>16</sup>

Competition between these two power centers became the prime factor in the structuring and shaping of the armed forces, in dividing the theater of operations, and

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<sup>15</sup> Smith, "Yemen on the Brink of Civil War?," 2011.

<sup>16</sup> ACRPS, p. 2.

in determining the military doctrine. The doctrine of the military formations affiliated with a certain power center became focused on protecting their patron from his competitor and from general internal threats. The army's doctrine was no longer based on protecting national sovereignty and defending the land, waters, and skies of the Yemeni Republic, and these military units rapidly started to resemble security units rather than an army. What is more, the focus of the decision-making centers within the army became fixated on the land forces at the expense of the air force and the navy—a telling fact given that the capital is located in the center of the country, away from the international (land and sea) borders of the republic.

The Yemeni Air Force currently possesses a few outdated airplanes (Migs, Sukhois, and Antonovs) that were inherited from the two Yemeni armies prior to their unification.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the incidence of military aircraft crashes due to technical faults has increased dramatically in recent years. Between 2010 and 2012 alone, ten military aircraft crashed, with an average of three airplanes per year.<sup>18</sup>

The majority of military forces were concentrated within the region of the capital Sanaa and the surrounding districts of the Sanaa province, as well as the major cities. Meanwhile, the border regions were neglected, or had their defense delegated to paramilitary formations composed of the tribesmen who reside in the border regions and are led by the chieftains. This led to a military and security vacuum in the desert regions, as well as the long coastline along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, which permitted al-Qaeda elements to infiltrate Yemeni territories after returning from Afghanistan. This security vacuum also facilitated the movement of members of terrorist groups between Yemen and the Horn of Africa.<sup>19</sup> In the shadow of this security loophole, al-Qaeda was able to establish bases and training camps for its fighters in some of the parts of the provinces of Marib, Shabwa, and Abyan. Eritrean forces were also able to easily occupy the Island of Hanish in December 1995, while the armed

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<sup>17</sup> These are weak and outdated equipment, which were further dilapidated due to the war of 1994 (May 4–July 7, 1994) between the northern and southern armies. As a result, the naval and air forces were incapable of averting the attack of Eritrean forces against the Hanish Island, which began on December 15, 1995; that limited confrontation ended with the Eritrean forces taking control over the Island on December 17, 1995, and with Yemen resorting to international arbitration.

<sup>18</sup> "The only explanation," 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Glosemeyer, *Dancing on Snake Heads in Yemen*, p. 8.

forces became incapable of securing the economically-vital regions, especially the oil-producing regions and the electrical transmission lines.

During the outbreak of the Yemeni revolution in 2011, the revolution's youth prepared a black list with the names of a number of the relatives of former president Saleh that occupied positions in the civilian and military state institutions, including nine officers.<sup>20</sup> On March 21, 2011, Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, commander of the Northwestern region and the First Armored Division, Brigadier Muhammad Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, commander of the Eastern region, and a number of brigade commanders announced their support for the revolution and the revolutionaries, declaring the formation of "the pro-revolution Army," which promised to protect the "freedom squares" and the sites of demonstrations in the regions where its forces were stationed. The revolutionaries began calling the units that remained loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh as "the family army". Hidden divisions finally surfaced, and the capital Sanaa, Taizz, and other cities and regions, witnessed clashes between the two armies and the militias affiliated with them.

## The Restructuring of the Armed Forces

The executive mechanism that was set up as part of the GCC initiative, signed on November 23, 2011, included an article decreeing that a committee should be formed to restructure the army and end its division.<sup>21</sup> The vice-president Abd Rabbuh Mansur

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<sup>20</sup> The military men on the list were: Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh (commander of the Republican Guard and the special forces), Yahya Muhammad Abdullah Saleh (chief of staff of central security), Tariq Muhammad Abdullah Saleh (commander of the special guard), Ammar Muhammad Abdullah Saleh (director of the national security apparatus), Ali Muhsin Saleh al-Ahmar (commander of the Northwestern region and of the First Armored Division), Ali Saleh al-Ahmar (commander of the air force and of the Sixth Air Force Brigade), Mahdi Maqula (commander of the Southern region), Muhammad Ali Muhsin (commander of the Eastern region), and Muhammad Abdullah Haidar (commander of the 35<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade).

<sup>21</sup> Within five days of GCC initiative and its executive mechanism's enactment, the vice-president was to form and chair a military affairs committee during the first transitional phase with the aim of establishing security and stability. This committee worked to guarantee: a) the ending of the division within the armed forces and the treatment of its root causes; b) an end to all military conflicts; c) the return of the armed forces and other military formations to their bases, ending the public military presence in the capital and other cities, and the evacuation of all militias and armed and irregular formations from the capital and the other cities; d) the removal of checkpoints, barrages, and fortifications that were created in all provinces; e) the rehabilitation of those who do not meet the conditions for service in the armed forces and the security organs; and f) taking all necessary measures in order to prevent military

Hadi issued a decree forming this committee on December 4, 2011. The committee began its work to achieve stability, evacuate the armed militias from the capital Sanaa and the city of Taizz, and remove the barricades that were erected in the streets of both cities. The committee proceeded to formulate an action plan consisting of three stages:

1. An assessment of the context of the armed forces through field visits to the military regions and military units in order to examine their situation and consult with their commanders.
2. Holding a strategic symposium, during which the preliminary vision for the restructuring of the armed forces was to be set, in addition to the main thrust of the structural and administrative reforms. As per the outcome of the symposium, a law was to be issued regulating and organizing the armed forces, and determining the fundamental bases, the military formations, the tasks of the various commanders and institutions, and the military job descriptions, as well as the functions of each committee, department, region, brigade, and battalion. Subsequently, the department of officers and soldiers' affairs and the department of armament were to formulate a plan for the redistribution of human and financial resources in accordance with the new established structures and job descriptions.
3. A redistribution of the soldiers and the weapons to the units and military regions in accordance with the new military structure.

In tandem with the work of the military committee, President Hadi issued a number of directives aimed at reducing the intensity of division within the armed forces. On March 1, 2012, he issued a directive removing Brigadier Mahdi Maqula (loyal to the former president) from the leadership of the southern military region and the command of the 31<sup>st</sup> Armored Brigade, reappointing him as vice-president to the general staff for human resources.

On April 6, 2012, the president issued a number of momentous decisions, including the removal of General Tariq Muhammad Abdullah Saleh (the nephew of the former

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confrontations in Yemen. The military affairs committee is to establish security and stability throughout the two transitional phases by preparing the conditions for peace and take the necessary steps to integrate the armed forces under the structure of a professional, patriotic, and unified command, within the bounds of the rule of law.

president) from the command of the Special Guard and the Third Republican Guard Armored Brigade, reappointing him as commander of the 37<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade in Hadramout; Brigadier Muhammad Saleh al-Ahmar (half-brother to the former president) was removed from the leadership of the air force and the air defense, and reappointed as adviser to the minister of defense. He also stripped Brigadier Muhammad Ali Muhsin (loyal to Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar) from the leadership of the Eastern military region, and reappointed him as vice-president to the general staff for land forces affairs. On August 6, he issued another directive, establishing the forces of the Presidential Guard, which were composed of four brigades, three of which used to be part of the Republican Guard (the First Special Forces Brigade, the Second Protection Brigade, and the Third Armored Brigade). The fourth brigade within the former Republican Guard (the 314<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade) was originally affiliated with the First Armored Division. The decision also included the transfer of eight brigades from the Republican Guard and the First Armored Division to their respective military regions.

In mid-November 2012, the committee of military affairs organized a conference with a number of military experts, and issued a recommendation to form a specialized military committee in order to prepare the strategic vision for the re-organization and restructuring of the armed forces. This strategy included the redistricting of military regions; the redeployment of the armed forces in accordance with the defense needs of the country—determining an optimal size for the armed forces; the preparation of a chronological plan for the treatment of the imbalances caused by the inflation in the number of the armed forces; the re-distribution of manpower; the application of the retirement law and retiring the excess capacity as per the new structure; the establishment of the broad lines for the law of military job descriptions; cleansing the administration of the armed forces from corruption; reactivation of the law of the mandatory national defense service; activation of the general reserve law; establishment of a system for full mobilization; reorganization and development of the naval forces and the coastal defenses; completion of the structuring of the border guard forces and hastening their reorganization and deployment in order for them to fulfill their mission in protecting the borders of the country; and, finally, effectuating the needed amendments to the military laws, regulations, and charters, in particular the laws of service and retirement.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *The September 26<sup>th</sup> Daily* (in Arabic), issue (1668), November 15, 2012.

On December 19, 2012, President Hadi issued presidential decree 104 for the year 2012 regarding the regulatory structure of the armed forces, which would include five main branches within the armed forces: the air force and the air defense, the navy and coastal defense, the land forces, the border guard, and the strategic reserve. The strategic reserve is made up of two components: the missile force (composed of the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> missile brigades) and the special operations (the Special Forces, the anti-terrorism units, the First Mountain Infantry Brigade, and the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Brigade). All of these units used to belong to the Republican Guard. The other brigades and formations of the Republican Guard and the First Armored Division were affiliated with the Yemeni land forces, which were divided—according to the decree—into seven military regions.

On April 10, 2013, a new set of decisions was issued creating a new position, the general inspector of the armed forces, the vice-president of the general staff, four aides to the defense minister (an aide for strategic planning, for human resources, for logistical support, and one for technology), five committees within the general staff (operations, intelligence, training and formation, human resources, and logistical support), and, finally, the creation of a consultative committee for the general commander of the armed forces. The decision also stipulated the division of the theater of operations into separate military zones, the redistricting of the seven military regions that were included in the December 19 decision, the formation of a reserve force for the ministry of defense (the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade, the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, the 62<sup>nd</sup> Armored Brigade, the 63<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade, the 83<sup>rd</sup> Artillery Brigade, and the 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade), the affiliation of the 89<sup>th</sup> and Ghamdan Brigades to the logistical support committee, and the attachment of all military training facilities to the committee of training and formation. The decree also stipulated the appointment of five officers from the two power centers within the armed forces as military attaches in the embassies of the Yemeni Republic in Qatar, Egypt, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Ethiopia. Finally, Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh was appointed as the Yemeni ambassador in the United Arab Emirates, and Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar was appointed as an adviser to the president for the affairs of defense and security.

## The Stances of the Military Power Centers Regarding the Restructuring of the Armed Forces

When President Hadi issued a decree relieving Brigadier Muhammad Saleh al-Ahmar from the command of the air force and the air defense, and the removal of General Tariq Muhammad Abdullah Saleh from the leadership of the Special Guard and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Republican Guards Armored Brigade, neither officer complied with the presidential decision. Muhammad Saleh al-Ahmar's mutiny continued for 18 days, during which he threatened to bomb Sanaa International Airport, leading to a halt in civilian air traffic. When President Hadi issued a directive creating a new military formation named "the missile force," which included the missile brigades that previously belonged to the Republican Guard, Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh refused to hand over these units, threatening to bombard the capital with missiles. In retort, President Hadi affirmed that he intends to execute all the articles of the GCC initiative and its executive mechanism; during a press conference on November 19, 2012, he exclaimed: "the GCC initiative is not 'the document of pact and reconciliation', every Yemeni must understand that the GCC initiative and its executive mechanism are tied to the GCC and the United Nations, and to the Security Council decisions 2014 and 2051; it will be executed to the letter, and whoever attempts to trespass or rebel will be punished by the Yemeni people before being punished by the United Nations."<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, while attending the proceedings of the first symposium for the reorganization and restructuring of the police force on December 9, 2012, President Hadi firmly warned those who would interfere in the functioning of the army and the security forces, as well as those who engage in bombings and assassinations, and further threatened to expose the corruption files within the armed forces and abolish the law of immunity.<sup>24</sup> It appears that Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh understood the seriousness and gravity of President Hadi's words and insistence on achieving the unification and

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<sup>23</sup> The Press Conference of President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in Sanaa, in the presence of the UN General Secretary and the GCC General Secretary on November 19, 2012, on the first anniversary of the signing of the GCC initiative. The conference and its proceedings can be viewed on the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ANU-cvCn4Zc>.

<sup>24</sup> "The details of the unannounced session," 2012.

restructuring of the armed forces, as he traveled to Italy for a vacation—in anticipation of the following decisions that were issued on December 19.

Despite Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar's welcoming the December 19 decisions when they were issued, he was far less brisk in executing these orders. The media outlets affiliated with him waged a media campaign against President Hadi, which was followed by the brigadier declaring, outright, that he will not obey the presidential order. While answering a press question on whether he will ask for retirement in fulfillment of the promise that he made to the revolutionaries at the beginning of the revolution, he answered: "in truth, it is my conscience and religion and patriotism that prevent me from exiting public service and relaxing while Yemen is undergoing these crises. Moreover, there are parties that are dragging Yemen, ever so often, on the path of disaster, and they need people like me who understand their tactics and methods; remaining by the side of the President General Commander Hadi will help prevent the schemes of these parties. In other words, when the other parties commit to the security of Yemen and to not harming the country, then we discuss our own commitments."<sup>25</sup> Brigadier al-Ahmar, in the meantime, welcomed his appointment as an advisor to the president for the affairs of defense and security, which was issued on April 10, 2013, appearing on the Yemeni TV in the traditional Yemeni dress declaring his support for the presidential decisions and his commitment to their enforcement. In affirmation of his commitment to the presidential decisions, the very next day he performed the constitutional oath as the advisor the president, the supreme commander of the armed forces, for the affairs of defense and security.

## Other Reactions to the Restructuring Plan

The decision to restructure the Yemeni armed forces was received in the southern provinces with little enthusiasm, as many southerners believe that the restructuring of the army is a matter that exclusively concerns the Yemeni Arab Republic (i.e., North Yemen prior to the unification). Some factions within the Southern Movement expressed their dissatisfaction with the restructuring of the army since, they claimed, it would tighten the military and security grip of the "Northern occupation forces" over the

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, *al-Sharq al-Awsat* daily (London), issue 12514, March 3, 2013.



South. Nevertheless, some of the leaders from the Southern Movement welcomed the new directives.

On the other hand, in Northern provinces, the decision to reunite and restructure the army was met with overwhelming popular joy. The revolution's youth launched demonstrations supporting the restructuring plan throughout the capitals of the Northern provinces. Yemen's opposition party coalition, the Joint Meeting Party (JMP), also expressed their support for the decisions, and in tandem with the popular and political welcoming of each decision, the youth and the JMP demanded that President Hadi expedite the restructuring plan. The masses and the political factions were aware that President Hadi's decisions in 2012 were mostly aimed at reducing the powers of the two poles within the military establishment, but that they are not enough to unify the armed forces. These directives may provide a legal framework for the restructuring of the army, but they do not in and of themselves lead to the army's restructuring on the ground. As a result, the president found himself squeezed between the popular and political pressures to hasten the restructuring process and relieve the relatives of Ali Abdullah Saleh of their leadership positions within the armed forces, and the spirit and executive mechanism of the GCC initiative, which is based on the notion of compromise. For instance, President Hadi was faced with the difficult decision of relieving Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar and General Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh from their positions, a decision fraught with risks due their likelihood to refuse to comply with those orders, just as they rejected the decisions of December 2012. The other option was to keep both men and place them at the head of two of the seven military regions. However, this would have stripped the restructuring decisions of any practical meaning since the continuation of both men in senior military positions was sufficient to maintain the division within the armed forces. This delicate situation forced President Hadi to exercise patience before issuing the restructuring directives, especially in light of the regional and international support enjoyed by the two centers of power within the army: the US, known for its support of General Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh (commander of the Republican Guard and the Special Forces), who they saw as a vital partner against the war on terrorism; and Saudi Arabia, who supported General Ali Muhsin al-

Ahmar,<sup>26</sup> “especially after he became the main symbol for the war against Ansar Allah (the Huthis)”.<sup>27</sup>

It was clear that President Hadi was faced with two choices: either remove Ahmad Ali Saleh and Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar together or keep them together.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, on April 10, 2013, he issued a presidential decision appointing the heads of the seven military regions, which excluded General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar and General Ahmad Ali Saleh, with the first appointed as adviser to the president for military and security affairs and the second as Yemen’s ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. There are several indicators that these decisions will be applied without delay, one of which involves the former president’s trip to Saudi Arabia (under the guise of medical treatment) coming as a prelude to these decisions, which stripped him of his last bastion of influence within the military, the one element he relied upon in order to remain in Yemen.

While the military centers of power opposed the president’s decisions on restructuring the army, President Hadi’s directives were met with significant popular support, in addition to the support of the 10 countries sponsoring the GCC initiative (including Saudi Arabia and the US). On April 9, President Hadi met with the ambassadors of these countries in Sanaa in order to inform them of the decisions he was going to make public the next day and guarantee their support for his plan of action. The media published reports claiming that the US Ambassador Gerald Firestein met with Brigadier Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar three hours before the president announced his decisions, and impressed upon him the fact that he had no choice but to acquiesce to the decisions that were about to be issued, and that protesting against them will expose him to international sanctions. At the same time, the states sponsoring the GCC initiative applied pressures on former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and the military power centers that were loyal to him to accept all the decisions relating to the army’s restructuring.

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<sup>26</sup> Ali, 2011.

<sup>27</sup> Alwazir, “Achieving Long-Term Stability,” p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> ICG, p iii.

## Measures Still Pending in the Restructuring Plan

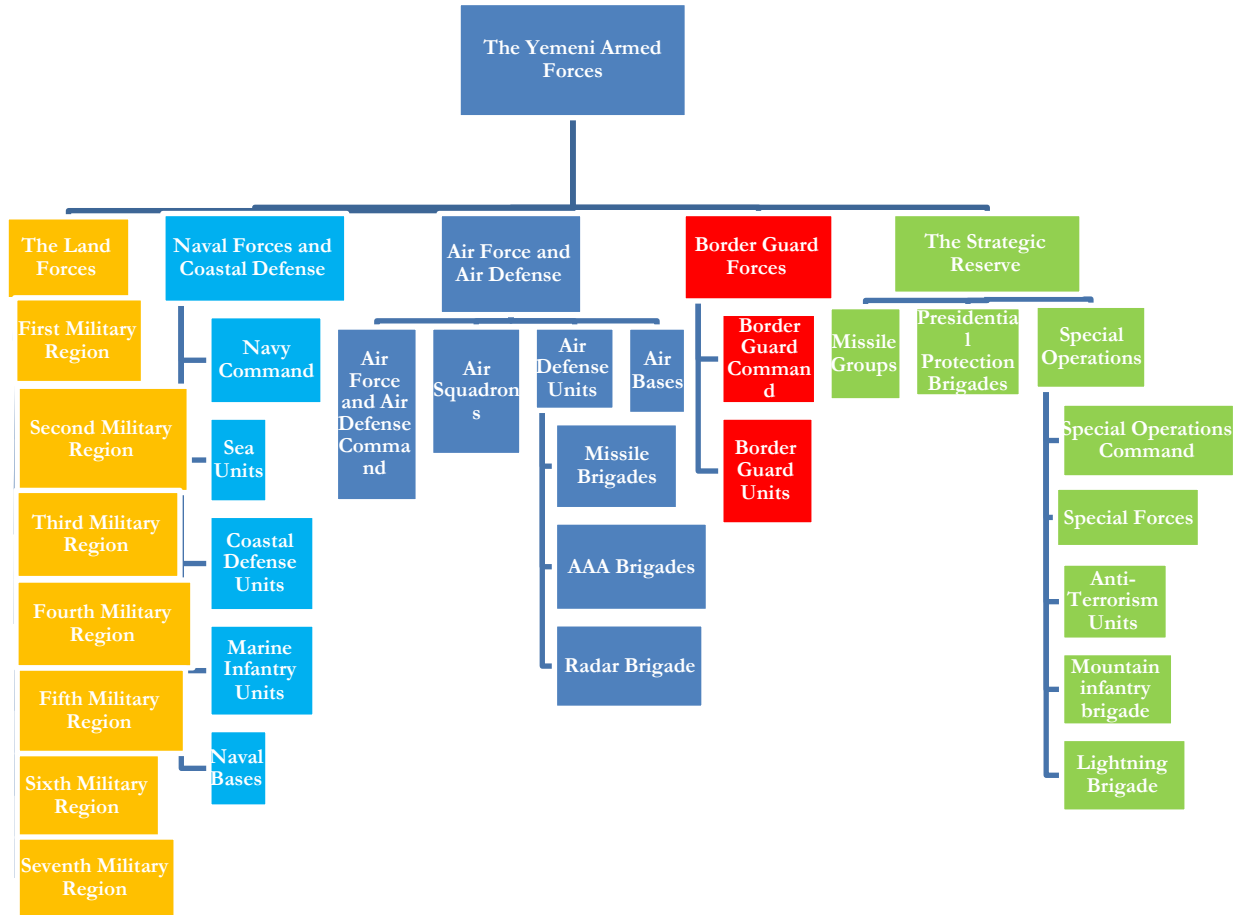
President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi's actions thus far can contribute to unifying the army and ending its division. The directives unify the armed forces within a new framework that is composed of three main branches: the first branch is that of the land forces, which are deployed throughout seven military regions (the first headquartered in Sayyun; the second in Mukalla; the third in Maarib; the fourth in Aden; the fifth in Hodeida; the sixth in Zumar; and the seventh in Amran); the second branch is that of the navy and the coastal defense, which is composed of the leadership of the naval forces and the coastal defense, sea units, coastal defense units, navy marines units, and naval bases. The third branch of the armed forces includes the air force and the air defense, which is composed of the leadership of the air force and the air defense, air squadrons, air defense units (missile brigades and anti-aircraft artillery brigades and a radar brigade), and air bases. In addition to these three branches, the armed forces encompass the border guard's forces, which are composed of the border guard command and border guard units.

The new structure of the armed forces also includes a military formation called "the strategic reserve," which is composed of the missile units (organizationally affiliated with the supreme commander of the armed forces), the special operations (linked organizationally to the Ministry of Defense and, in practice, to the supreme commander of the armed forces). The special operations unit is composed of the special operations command, the special forces, the anti-terrorism units, a mountain infantry brigade, and a special forces brigade (see the figure below: the new structure of the Yemeni Army).

## The New Structure of the Yemeni Armed Forces

The importance of the new structure goes beyond unifying the Yemeni Army, as it contributes to the rebuilding and reshaping the armed forces' doctrine, transforming them from a regime-protection force to an army for the defense of the nation. The commands of the first through the fourth military regions are located in or near the regions where al-Qaeda is present. The majority of military units and brigades will be moved from the capital Sanaa to the regions where al-Qaeda is most concentrated, as well as the border regions (land and sea). Meanwhile, the capital will be emptied from its army base, including the camp of the First Armored Division, with a decree issued by President Hadi on April 10, 2013 ordering that the camp be transformed into a public

park: the “March 21 Park”. Only the forces of Yemen’s Strategic Reserve will remain in the capital, and will be concentrated in Camp 48, located at Sanaa’s southern entrance.



These decisions are ultimately but a preface for the comprehensive restructuring of the army. There are still many measures that must be enacted during what remains of the transitional phase. The envisioned priorities include the reinstatement of the mandatory military service, the reactivation of the armed forces’ retirement law, the cleansing of military records from “fictive” soldiers and officers, and the redeployments between the branches of the armed forces and the military regions. The preliminary plan of the team that was tasked with restructuring the military forces indicates the optimal size of the army in the current conditions of Yemen is around 375,000 (about 1 to 1.5 percent of the total population), 85 percent of whom are professional soldiers and officers, and 15

percent are reserve soldiers and officers (after the reinstatement of the mandatory military service).

Furthermore, they suggested that the manpower of the armed forces should be distributed along the three main branches as follows: 80 percent for the land forces, 10 percent for the navy and the coastal defense, and 10 percent for the air force and the air defense. The percentage of officers in each military unit should not exceed 7 percent of the total manpower of the unit; non-commissioned officers should not exceed 25 percent, and soldiers should be no less than 65 percent. As for the armed forces as a whole, the percentage of the command and control elements, as well as administrators and technicians, should not exceed 15 percent of the armed forces' total, and combat troops should represent at least 70 percent of the total.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

The steps taken to date on the path to unifying and restructuring the army are of extreme importance. They contribute to building trust among the political and social forces that are participating in Yemen's National Dialogue Conference, and facilitate the building of a civic state. Nevertheless, President Hadi must hasten the application of the rest of the army restructuring plan, taking advantage of the popular and international support that he currently enjoys. It is expected that the anti-corruption measures within the armed forces will be faced by stiff resistance on the part of the "smaller" power centers among officers (battalion and company commanders) who were not yet included in the restructuring decisions, as well as the traditional elites who benefit from the salaries of "fictive soldiers" and from the war economy that has sustained them over the last three decades. In order to guarantee the continuity of the plan to unify and restructure the army, coordination should be enacted between the military affairs committee and the armed forces and security command, within the National Dialogue Conference.

Laws should be proposed prohibiting those who were active officers during the past five years from running as candidates for the presidency or parliament; there should be an additional law that bans individuals who previously served in the armed forces for more than five years from combining the president's post with that of the supreme

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<sup>29</sup> "General al-Harbi Plan," 2012.

commander of the armed forces, and prohibits the appointment of first-degree relatives of the president to the command of any military formation. The government should also prohibit the use of paramilitary forces and the sale of weapons to groups other than the armed forces. Recruitment for all military units should be effectuated through the recruitment department, or through public advertisement in a manner that ensures equal opportunities. Active military personnel should be banned from participating in the formation of civil society organizations, and they must not be allowed membership in the administrative committees of such organizations. Moreover, commercial activity should be prohibited for the armed forces officers while in service, and the armed forces should be supervised by the anti-corruption and accountability apparatus. Most importantly, institutional mechanisms should be set up in order to enforce these principles on the ground.

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