



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

## ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Hadi's Presidential Appointments at the Dawn of a New Round of Political Negotiations

Policy Analysis Unit | Apr 2016

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## Introduction

Yemeni President Abd Rabbuhe Mansour Hadi has issued a set of presidential decrees, sacking his deputy, Prime Minister Khaled Bahah, and appointing General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and Ahmed Obeid bin Dagher, as Vice President and Prime Minister respectively. These decrees came as preparations were gathering steam to bring the parties to the Yemeni conflict to Kuwait on April 18, in order to launch negotiations aimed at reaching a political settlement to a five year-long crisis that has culminated in the regional military campaign against aHouthi rebels.

## Bahah's Dismissal

Although the conflictual nature of President Hadi's relationship with his deputy and premier had come into the open in recent months, Khaled Bahah's dismissal and the consequent appointments are significant, both in terms of the decision's timing and scope. Hadi appointed Bahah as his deputy three weeks after the commencement of operation "Decisive Storm~~Storm of Determination~~" on March 26, 2015, a move reflecting internal and regional concerns to avoid a possible power vacuum in the event of a vacancy in the office of President. The decision to name Bahah as Prime Minister was taken in the wake of the September 2014 Houthi takeover of Sana'a; his widely-recognized administrative expertise and experience was expected to bring about improvements in the performance of the Hadi government, which had come in for severe criticism during Hadi's tenure as interim president in the aftermath of the 2011 Gulf Initiative. Hadi's inability to dismantle former President Ali Abdallah Saleh's client network, particularly within the military establishment, may well have set the stage for the alliance between the Houthis and Saleh to turn the tables on the political process then underway, and to move to seize control of Yemen in its entirety, by force of arms. Their attempt started in Sa'adah province in November 2013, proceeding to Amran (July 2014), Sana'a (September 2014), and onwards to the southern provinces, starting in

January 2015. In the meantime, President Hadi. Who was under house arrest, had managed to flee ~~from the site of his virtual detention in Sana'a~~ to Aden, which he later pronounced to be his temporary capital.

Hadi's decrees had a striking tone of condemnation: of his deputy for failing to deal effectively with the deterioration in the economic, humanitarian and security conditions in the country after the long period of warfare, and of the state's apparent inability to re-establish its authority or provide for security in areas liberated from the Houthis. This latter vacuum was felt particularly in the south, which was witnessing the growing influence of al-Qa'idah and other radical jihadist organizations, who had managed to take over control of major ports such as Mukalla, one of the most important Hadramout ports on the Arabian Sea. Economic and humanitarian conditions have deteriorated so much that the United Nations recently indicated that more than 80 percent of Yemen's population required food aid<sup>1</sup>, and about half of the Yemeni people stand on the brink of starvation.<sup>2</sup>

The blockade imposed by the Houthi rebels on a number of areas, especially in and around Taiz, has intensified the humanitarian relief crisis, and has led the international community to pressure Arab states to halt the coalition air campaign and prevent it from achieving its objectives.

Hadi's justifications for his dismissal of Bahah underlined each of these factors, citing: "faltering government performance in alleviating the suffering of our people, in resolving their problems, and in meeting their needs, and particularly in reintegrating

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<sup>1</sup> U.N. warns against slowing recent increase in aid flow to Yemen, Reuters, March 3, 2016  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-war-un-idUSKCN0W529K>

<sup>2</sup> Famine threatens half of Yemen: WFP, Reuters, March 23, 2016  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-food-idUSKCN0WP16F>

the resistance fighters, treating the wounded, and caring for the martyrs' families, and in addition for failing to provide a receptive government environment for the receipt of the unlimited support provided by brethren in the Arab Coalition...in order to achieve our people's aspirations for the restoration of the state and security and stability, in the highest national interest of the country."

In practice, the decision was tantamount to a reassessment of the general policy of relying upon technocrats for the administration of the country's affairs, ~~under current circumstances~~; given the current situation of war and negotiations, Yemen needs a political leadership that enjoys popular bases of support in the north and in the south. The dismissal decision appeared as if it were an attempt to respond to a new phase that demanded a more harmonious and cohesive government leadership, one that also enjoyed popular support along broad tribal, party, and regional lines. All the more so if we take into account the antagonism that characterized the relationship between Hadi and Bahah, wherein neither man enjoyed any real support base even in their home areas — Hadi in the south and Bahah in the Hadhramaut.

A change was thus inevitable, especially given the talk, on the part of the leadership of the Arab Coalition, of an end to major military operations in Yemen and preparations for a shift towards a political settlement. This will start April 18 with negotiations in Kuwait, for which the stage will be set by a cease fire commencing on April 10, in keeping with the accord shepherded and announced by the United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh. Saudi Arabia recently confirmed reports that negotiations with a Houthi delegation were underway in Riyadh, with the first outcomes of these talks already seen in a calming along the Saudi-Yemeni border, along with an exchange of prisoners between the two sides. But although the dismissal of Bahah occurred in this context, and can be considered indicative of a new phase in which the conflict shifts from the battlefield to the ~~negotiation-negotiating~~ table, the appointments that followed on from the dismissal appear to convey other messages.

## Al-Ahmar's Vice Presidency

General Ali Mohsin al-Ahmar is a model professional soldier, with some forty years in the military, attaining the highest rank in Yemen until his departure from the country after the fall of Sana'a to the Houthi rebels in September 2014. He is respected among the Yemeni military leadership that is not allied with former president Saleh, and has a strong support network within the army. With his roots in the Sanhan region, which is also Saleh's, and his network of strong tribal ties there, his appointment to Vice President lends him added weight among officers who had been close to the former president but who also supported the coup. These officers would have a clear representative in the new ~~V~~ice ~~P~~resident (who is also Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces) in the event they choose to return to the fold of the recognized government. The appointment of al-Ahmar, with his military rank and his new political portfolio as Vice President, constitutes a powerful message to the Houthis: he is considered to be one of their ~~most~~-harshes~~t~~\_opponents in the Yemeni political scene. A historic adversary, he commanded the First Armored Division based in the vicinity of Sana'a until September 2014, and took part in all six of the wars waged by the Yemeni government against the Houthis since 2004.

His appointment therefore is a message to the Houthis: the failure of peace negotiations will mean the continuation of the war until they recognize the legitimate government and implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216, requiring them to hand over their weapons, withdraw from cities, and return to the table for dialogue. Indeed, the Houthis have interpreted the appointment of al-Ahmar as Vice President to be a signal of a hardening position on the part of President Hadi and the leadership of the Arab Coalition: a political figure close to the Houthis described the



move as effectively cutting off the path to dialogue and any prospect of reaching the expected understandings in Kuwait.<sup>3</sup>

Al-Ahmar enjoys strong relationships with many Yemeni groups and parties, including al-Islah, which is considered to be a major political and ideological foe of the Houthi-Saleh alliance. His absolute enmity to former President Ali Abdallah Saleh would seem to effectively exclude the latter from any political settlement.

### Bin Dagher: Regaining Balance

The appointment of Ahmed Obaid bin Dagher as Prime Minister is also to be considered significant, as he represents the most senior Yemeni public servant to have broken away from former President Ali Abdallah Saleh in the past year. He had previously served as Saleh's First Deputy in the General People's Congress party where his appointment came with Hadi's expulsion from the same post in November 2014 in response to the travel ban decision and freezing of assets that was imposed by the UN Security Council upon Saleh and two Houthi leaders. Ben Dagher joined Hadi in the Saudi capital Riyadh after the start of the "Decisive Storm~~Storm of Determination~~".

Ben Dagher, like his predecessor Ahmed Bahah, hails from the Hadhramout, and enjoys considerable support there. His appointment as Prime Minister came barely hours after the announcement of the decision of the Congress Party, headed by Saleh, to dismiss all the dissident leaders who supported the Coalition, including Ben Dagher, who was disposed from the party the same day he was appointed Prime Minister. This was an immediate response to the move taken by the pro-Saleh wing of the party and aimed to strengthen his position within the breakaway faction, lending it the status of official representation within the government. It also was a useful move to increase its ability to attract a larger number of members of the Congress and so isolate Saleh and his supporters.

<sup>3</sup> <http://rsd24.net/newsdetails1.aspx?id=3427661>

These appointments are also an attempt to achieve a balance in the leadership of the state; the appointment of al-Ahmar, who is from the north of the country, as Vice President, counterbalances the appointment of Ben Dagher, affiliated with the south, as Prime Minister. This is a means of assuring the broadest possible participation and expanding the base of support enjoyed by Hadi's leadership, while at the same time heading off calls for secession and accusations of marginalization and exclusion, at a critical phase of the country's history.

## Conclusion

With preparations for the declaration of a cease fire nearly completed, heralding the start of a new round of negotiations in Kuwait, Hadi's appointments have delivered a two-pronged message: his government is prepared to reach a settlement, and is prepared for the continuation of war, in the event peace efforts fail. This latter prospect is a strong possibility in light of the intransigence of the Houthi rebels and the adherence of the former president to his hope to return to play a political role, despite the devastation his policies have brought upon Yemen. A readiness to face all the eventualities requires a more harmonious and representative leadership, with greater capacity to build alliances. This seems to be what Hadi's appointments have aimed to achieve, in one fell swoop.