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ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES



(Doha Institute)

**Assessment Report**

*The Army and Popular Revolution in Yemen*

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The popular uprising in Yemen, in early February, took the form of peaceful protests led by groups of youth who were motivated by the Egyptian revolution, and its ongoing demonstrations in Tahrir Square which turned into million-man marches.

President Saleh began making concessions from the very beginning; on February 2, he announced that he would step down at the end of his current term, would not run for presidency, and would not transfer power to his son at the end of his term; he dismissed several provincial governors, and announced an initiative for a referendum on a new constitution before the end of the year. These concessions, however, did not ease the growing pressure demanding the toppling of his regime.

The escalation of popular protests in Yemen began to draw in large numbers of opponents to the Saleh regime throughout Yemen with the passage of every day; these people collectively formed the largest group joining the protests after the Friday, March 18 massacre of demonstrators in *Taghyir* (change) Square when over fifty people were killed. Army chief, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the head of the First Armored Division, and the leader of the Northwest Military District were among the most prominent of those who declared their support for the revolution on March 20, and who proclaimed to protect the protestors against the regime's attacks against them. Those joining the ranks of the revolution also included the head of the Eastern Military Sector, General Mohammad Ali Mohsen (the president's cousin), General Hamid al-Qushaibi (head of the 310 Brigade in the Umran province), and the head of the Central Military Sector, General Saif al-Baqari, along with a large number of other officers. Air Base Commander of the 67<sup>th</sup> district in al-Hadida province, Ahmad al-Sinhani, also defected to the revolution, becoming the first air force officer to do so, as did the 61<sup>st</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> brigades of the Republican Guard in the Arhab directorate of the Sana'a province.

Public pressure on Saleh, who appeared to be gradually losing elements of his power, continued in the form of resignations from the party, government, parliament, and diplomatic missions, as well as the loss of support from the tribes allied to him when they declared their loyalty to the revolution after recurrent visits to Taghyir Square. This has put the president on the defensive, to the point that news spread throughout Yemen and abroad on March 23 that a transitional agreement had been reached in which the powers of the president were to be transferred to the vice president, and from him to a Presidential Council, and Saleh was going to step down in a matter of hours.

On Sunday, March 27, the Yemeni opposition announced that negotiations on the transfer of authority had been halted, and the next day Saleh announced that he would remain steadfast in the face of the ongoing protests, stating that he had the support of a majority of the country's population. This announcement coincided with a request by the General People's Congress (GPC) — the ruling party — which called on Saleh to remain in power until the end of his term in 2013. Thus, attitudes hardened once again in the face of a process of peaceful political

transition, sparking fears of another scenario that could lead to conflict and division within the country.

The factors that lead towards conflict and dissent within Yemen are also present within their military and armed forces though the commander-in-chief is President Saleh himself. The political situation in Yemen has not calmed down since the unification of the country in the early 1990s. During the past two decades, the country has witnessed a civil war between the North and South, as well as military confrontations with Salafi and Jihadi forces, and, most recently, the wars in Sa'ada. All of these have had repercussions on the country's political scene as they gave rise to various internal conflicts, most notable of which was the conflict between the country's most influential military in the army, Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, and President Saleh. Despite al-Ahmar's continuous support for the president in previous periods, the estrangement and conflict between the two became apparent during the last decade when Saleh's plan to bequeath his presidency to his son Ahmad came to light, and it became clearer that Saleh and his sons were expanding their monopoly over power in the country, matters that, when combined, turned al-Ahmar against Saleh. As a result, Saleh and his son Ahmad worked to weaken the First Armored Division by wearing it out in the "non-mandatory" wars of Sa'ada.

A large number of army officers supported the current revolution, seconding their demands from the regime and declaring their protection of the protesters on March 20. The regime's direct reaction was announced in the Defense Minister Mohammad Nasser Ali's speech on March 21 in which he proclaimed the army's support for President Saleh in the face of "any coup against democracy." There are doubts over the impact of the defense minister's statement on the army's course of action, however, given that it was the most powerful and influential figures in the army that had announced their support for the revolution.

The Yemeni army is considered the second largest military force on the Arabian Peninsula — after Saudi Arabia — with approximately 89,500 professional soldiers and officers enrolled in its ranks distributed as follows: 66,000 in infantry; 7,000 in navy; 5,000 in air force; and 11,500 in the Republican Guard and Special Forces. In September 2007, the government announced the reinstatement of compulsory military service. The military budget in Yemen accounts for about forty percent of the overall government budget, one of the highest proportional military budgets in the world. Yemen also has approximately 71,000 soldiers serving in paramilitary forces, fifty thousand of them in the Central Security Agency.

Yemen is also marked by the appointment of military and security commanders on the basis of family affiliation to ensure personal loyalty to the president. Most prominent of these leaders is Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh — the president's son — commander of the Republican Guard and Special Forces; Khalid Ali Abdullah Saleh — another of the president's sons — commander of the Mountain Troops Armored Division; Yahya Mohammed Abdullah Saleh — the president's nephew — Central Security chief of staff; Tariq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh — another of the president's nephews — commander of the Special Guard; Ammar Mohammed Abdullah Saleh

al-Ahmar — again the president’s nephew — national security chief; and Mohamed Saleh Abdallah Al-Ahmar — the President’s step-brother — commander of the Air Force. All of this shows a unique attempt in Yemen to ensure the army’s loyalty through direct familial allegiance. Given the redrawing of the political map of the army after prominent military commanders joined the revolution, it seems these family allegiances have not guaranteed the loyalty of anyone who was not originally a supporter of the regime.

It is clear today that Saleh’s dependence on his relatives in the army and security services did not necessarily represent a factor of continuity and stability for him, as the biggest threat he is facing today is posed by General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who was described in a 2005 US diplomatic cable published by Wikileaks as the strongest man in the country after Saleh,<sup>1</sup> the reason for the conflict between the two being over the matter of succession, as mentioned above.

Preparations for the succession plan have been in the works for nearly ten years. For this purpose, the Republican Guard, headed by Ahmad, has been strengthened; the force has specialized in counter-terrorism in Yemen, becoming the major recipient of US financial aid, which has grown from 5 million US Dollars in 2006 to 155 million US Dollars in 2010. In 2010, the US Department of Defense offered to spend 1.2 billion US Dollars over five years to support the efforts of the so-called fight against terrorism. The Republican Guard has thus received intensive US training, mostly carried out in secret as a result of discontent aroused by American military activity in the region, such as the US air strikes on the Yemeni interior in December 2009. Tribal and military leaders also adopt a negative attitude towards the Republican Guard, seeing it as having been used to bolster the influence of the president's son at their expense. Despite US military training and massive amounts of money that have been spent, the signs of Yemeni military’s weakness have been all too evident in the Sa’ada wars, which sapped the army’s strength; these wars also witnessed the accusation of the president's son Ahmad of intentionally prolonging the war in order to weaken the army. Furthermore, the army has not been able to resolve tribal conflicts in certain areas, nor has it been able to counteract the growing presence of al-Qaeda in recent years, to the point that the organization has appeared publicly at certain forums in the country. These conflicts have been used to ensure American support for Ali Abdullah Saleh, for fear of the alternative which appeared to be a jihadist Salafi alternative as it seemed at the time in some regions.

Entire military bases in Maran, Razeh, and Harf Sufian surrendered during the Sa’ada wars, handing over all their weapons and equipment to the Houthi group. The reason for these surrenders, according to soldiers imprisoned by the group, was that supplies had unjustifiably stopped reaching them. Other soldiers also accused the air force, led by the President’s step-brother, of bombing them or not working to break the siege imposed on them, on more than one occasion in the recent war in Sa'ada. Moreover, Saleh had also interfered in the structure of the army in recent years. After appointing his son Ahmed to his step-brother Ali Saleh al-Ahmar at the helm of the Republican Guard, Saleh “reshuffled” the military leadership in preparation of his son’s succession. In doing this, he removed the leaders close to Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, appointing others close to his son Ahmed in their stead. Saleh also established Mountain

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2011/03/110327\\_yemen\\_saleh\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/middleeast/2011/03/110327_yemen_saleh_interview.shtml)

Armored Infantry Division to compete with the First Armored Division led by Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar.

It seems that the dispute between President Saleh and Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar had reached an extremely dangerous level; Wikileaks documents showed that Yemeni authorities offered misleading intelligence to the Saudi Air Force in the sixth Sa'ada war which almost led to the bombing of a military base where al-Ahmar was present, a confirmation that Sana'a was looking to get rid of him.

The revolution has brought to light the disunity of the army represented in the recent skirmishes in Hadramout between an Army sector loyal to al-Ahmar, and a Republican Guard sector loyal to the president. This division between the increasingly obdurate president and the political class surrounding him, on the one hand, and the unbending opposition bloc, on the other, presages further clashes and divisions sweeping across large parts of the country if the president does not realize the necessity of his resignation in the face of the peaceful popular movement. The President is the one who can determine whether there will be a peaceful transfer of authority in the country, or whether he will plunge the country into violence prior to his departure.

We can add to this, the danger posed by armed tribes. The recent volatility in Yemen has encouraged these tribes to intervene, as we saw on March 23 when the tribes of the Jawf province expelled Republican Guard troops from the province after a short battle between the two sides. The tribes attacked the soldiers after they witnessed horrific scenes of Republican Guard brutal killing of protesters. Another recent dangerous escalation came when armed groups took control over the city of Ja'ar and other areas in the southern province of Abyan. The protesters and the nature of their revolution continue to be the main pacifying factors in the country.

Some of the revolution's youth have expressed their concern that Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar's declared support for the revolution will affect its civilian character, possibly leading to its hijacking by the military, not to mention al-Ahmar's status as a symbol of the previous regime. In Yemen's case, however, the youth have not developed a system with which to replace the existing one by force, as was the case with the Bolshevik or Iranian revolutions, and we cannot expect the army, as a whole, to side with them because of family allegiances that bind some military leaders to the President; the only way to protect the revolution from the violence of the military and other security agencies is that a part of the army joins the revolution. Indeed, a great part of those who have joined the revolution have been from the army. What is needed is that the democratic values of the revolution infiltrate the army's ranks, and that an understanding based on cooperation is reached with the military leadership.

There are other concerns that relate to the nature of the army's movement in meeting the challenges of the Yemeni arena after its division into supporters and opponents of the regime. Most prominent among these is the danger that the South may separate from the North, the al-Qaeda armed presence, and the rebellion in Sa'ada — armed clashes between the army and Houthi group continue to this moment — as well as skirmishes between latent armed groups and armed tribal protests. It seems that these conflicts have been deferred until after the departure of

Ali Saleh, unless his regime instigates such conflicts. After his departure, these conflicts will be linked to understandings reached in the transitional phase. It is no exaggeration to say that their resolution would constitute the first and most important challenge facing the new political system, as the resolution of these issues will be the prerequisite for the stability that can propel the transition forward, and enable it to bring about the desired change.

The coalition of the revolution's youth has not proffered a clear vision of what the political system should look like beyond their central demand for Saleh's departure. The multiplicity of affinities, affiliations and forces in a country that lacks organization makes it likely that the path towards the long-awaited change will be perilous. However, the well-informed and civil response of the revolution's youth towards the regime's provocations is what bodes well, given their context of a country populated by twenty-four million people and sixty million firearms. The Army has the ability, even after its division, to play a conscious role in dealing with the diverse and complex issues facing the country. It is, therefore, necessary that the youth and the military coordinate their future actions in order to combine the path and the power to carry the revolution to safety.