

Houthis Kill Top UAE-Backed Separatist Yemeni Commander

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Brief Analysis

Coming just weeks after Abu Dhabi's drawdown from the anti-Houthi fight, the provocative attack could be a pivotal moment for Yemen's future.

On August 1, a Houthi strike on a military graduation ceremony in Aden killed a major southern military figure. Brig. Gen. Munir Mahmoud Ahmad al-Mashali, more commonly known as Abu Yamamah al-Yafai, was a high-profile commander of the UAE-backed Security Belt Forces. He also supported a breakaway independent South Yemen in the chaos of the war with Houthi forces, which in 2014 deposed the internationally recognized government in Sana, the capital. His death sent shock waves across the south.

The war itself has stalemated between Saudi and UAE-backed government forces on one hand, and Houthi-aligned forces supported politically and militarily by Iran on the other. An Iranian missile or drone was probably involved in today's attack. Apart from Abu Yamamah, more than thirty soldiers were killed and dozens injured during the parade at the al-Jala military base, located in Aden's Buraiqa district. Despite publicly supporting the government of Yemeni prime minister Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, the UAE has primarily empowered those who favor the emergence of a separate South Yemen with Aden as its capital—often to the chagrin of Saudi Arabia, its close ally and partner in Yemen.

The attack is reminiscent of another Houthi-led strike on a military graduation ceremony, at al-Anad Air Base in Lahij in January 2019. At least six people were killed in that action, including Yemen's military intelligence chief. The Houthis have regularly targeted southern military gatherings.

Government Fighter and Separatist

Abu Yamamah, forty-five at the time of his death, started his career as a southern military officer, fought in the civil war against the north in 1994, and then helped form the nucleus of the southern resistance movement that

spearheaded protests in 2007. Sentenced to death by the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh around 2010, he went into hiding in Yafa, in southern Yemen. He participated in protests against Saleh's rule in 2011, and when the war against the Houthis broke out in 2015, he led forces against them in the south. His military effectiveness earned him several nicknames, including "Lion of the South" and "the feared one." Eventually appointed to lead the Security Belt Forces in Aden, he quickly became a key military commander in charge of area counterterrorism operations. He was a well-known member of the al-Yafai tribe, one of the largest tribal confederations in Yemen, known for its rugged toughness and support for southern independence. Under his leadership, the Security Belt Forces recruited heavily from Yafa and surrounding areas. His stature as one of the foremost military commanders in southern Yemen made him a target for his enemies, including the Houthis and al-Qaeda.

As head of the Security Belt Forces, Abu Yamamah technically reported to the Hadi-led central government. But he also attended meetings as a representative of the Southern Transitional Council (STC), which seeks to separate from the Hadi government. Like Abu Yamamah, Aidarous al-Zubaidi, the STC head, was sentenced to death by the Saleh government, and the two were in hiding together in Yafa. In a June 2019 meeting in Aden that I attended as part of a U.S. delegation with the STC, the soft-spoken Abu Yamamah sat only two seats away from Zubaidi, thus demonstrating his elevated stature in the pro-separatist group. At the same time, he wore his government military uniform and the red hat indicative of the Security Belt Forces. This arrangement aptly reflects the current state of security in southern Yemen, where major figures—many favored by the UAE for their fighting skills—ostensibly work for the Hadi government but practically favor an STC-led state. Complicating this scene further is Saudi opposition to the STC's separatist goals and the inherent friction this can create with the UAE.

Reactions and Consequences

In response to Abu Yamamah's death, the Yemeni government released a statement praising his sacrifice and saying that the solution to the national conflict was liberating Yemeni soil from the Houthis. Specific Yemeni officials also expressed condolences, including Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, who called the attack "heinous."

So far, the STC has been careful in its public statements, releasing a video calling the attack "treacherous" and eulogizing Abu Yamamah and others as "sacrificing their lives for the... independence of the south." Beyond this, they have asked southerners to "be patient" as they plan an appropriate response. The reaction from certain locals has been swifter. The community near Abu Yamamah's hometown, for example, appears to have at least temporarily closed a road to the north, a response that is likely to be mitigated by tribal negotiation. Moreover, as is common in Yemen, the family of Abu Yamamah may volunteer to avenge his death, although it is unclear what form that would take.

Abu Yamamah's death may have a ripple effect on the greater Yemeni conflict, perhaps even heightening hostilities. Capturing the mood among many, Summer Ahmed, an activist for southern independence, said Abu Yamamah's killing felt "like a deadly earthquake shook the south." Southern sources predict street protests will follow against the Houthis and, notably, against the Hadi government as well. Conspiracy theories about culpability often abound following such attacks, given the Yemeni reality that adversaries often form impromptu alliances against a common enemy. In this case, many such theories ascribe complicity or turning a blind eye to the Hadi government or the Islah Party, an Islamist bloc—charges that could ignite especially impassioned independence protests. Southern media are particularly focused on a security alert allegedly issued by the government on July 29, about which STC officials claim they were unaware, warning of potential terrorist attacks against major military figures and security checkpoints. The STC officials accuse the government overall of inadequately protecting them—a claim the government has previously parried by complaining that STC-aligned forces do not share their plans with it and insist on arranging their own security.

In addition to potential protests, STC-aligned forces are likely to ramp up their fight against the Houthis along the north-south front in provinces such as Dhale. STC figures voice hope that UAE forces, which remain operational in Yemen against terrorist threats in the south, will aid in this effort, although it is not clear if this is outside their new scope away from the Houthi fight and toward the counterterrorism mission.

Conclusion

Indeed, this attack comes just weeks after the UAE announced its drawdown from the military fight against the Houthis and its granting of full support instead for United Nations–led diplomatic efforts to contain the group. Although Houthis regularly target military gatherings in the south, suggesting the UAE military departure was not the catalyst, the killing of one of the UAE’s favored military commanders by the Iran-equipped Houthis will not go unnoticed in Abu Dhabi. In fact, the attack suggests Iran is providing the Houthis with exactly the kinds of capabilities the UAE has long feared. The Gulf federation has reacted to recent events involving Iran in the region with unease and caution; it will likely advise the same type of caution to the STC.

Caution can be the basis of a smart military and diplomatic strategy if backfilled with a political plan—but such a workable political plan has long proven absent in Yemen. The death of Abu Yamamah, in addition to inevitably sparking fury in the south, should reignite a debate about what the political future of Yemen can and should look like and how outside actors so closely involved in the country can help get it there.

Elana DeLozier is a research fellow in The Washington Institute’s Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy. ❖

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