Yemen's Second-in-Command May Have a Second Coming

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Brief Analysis

Gen. Ali Mohsen could wind up as interim president despite his unpalatability to various parties, so Washington should prepare accordingly to avoid derailing peace talks.

Washington's recent push for Yemen talks **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-officials-push-for-yemen-talks)** is likely a product of pressure on several fronts: the rising sense of urgency **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-a-ceasefire-possible-in-yemen)** about ending the destructive war; diplomatic troubles **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-must-impose-a-price-on-saudis-but-one-with-a-clear-purpose)** with Saudi Arabia; mounting congressional calls to halt military support **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-saudi-security-cooperation-part-2-restricting-operational-support-in-y)** for the Saudi-led coalition; and the prospect of catastrophic famine by year's end. Another factor merits more scrutiny, however: the declining health of Yemeni president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, who is seventy-three and suffers from chronic heart trouble. He was admitted to a Cleveland hospital in late October, only weeks after a previous hospital stay. Some observers suggest that Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who represented the government at the recent IISS Manama Dialogue in Bahrain, is in charge as his boss recovers.

Appointed as vice president in April 2016, Ali Mohsen was the preeminent military commander during the three-decade rule of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. As such, he supported Yemeni mujahedin in Afghanistan in the 1980s, then recruited many of them back home to fight a civil war against the south in 1994. In the process, he cultivated relationships with extremist clerics and militants who would later be tied to terrorist activity inside Yemen. He also led a war against the Houthis in 2004-2010.

Politically, Ali Mohsen is an ally of Islah, a movement that has historically included the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis,

and some northern tribal families. He was named vice president in part because his tribal ties and military experience in the north were expected to help the coalition war effort. Currently, he spends his time between Saudi Arabia, with whom he has a good working relationship, and Yemen's Marib province, where many Islah fighters are now based.

Given his affinity for Islamists and his commanding role in past wars against the south and the Houthi movement, Ali Mohsen is reviled across much of Yemen and objectionable to both the United States and the United Arab Emirates. His rise to power—even temporarily—could deepen existing divisions in Yemen, spark a crisis within the coalition, and potentially disrupt future peace talks.

ALI MOHSEN AND THE SOUTH

If Ali Mohsen becomes president, it would deepen secessionist sentiment among southerners, who see him as the face of the 1994 north-south civil war that resulted in their defeat and the country's continued unification. After losing to his army on the battlefield, they were further humiliated by postwar land grabs, economic marginalization, and the forced retirement of many southern military leaders and civil servants. Out of that experience, a flurry of secessionist groups arose, each claiming to represent the south's best interests. Their inability to unite thwarted past secession efforts, but Ali Mohsen's ascendance could unite the movement's disparate parts against a common enemy.

In contrast, some southerners are less willing to directly confront Hadi. In 1986, a failed coup in the former South Yemen led to a short but bloody war between southerners a few years before unification with the north, and memories of that internal conflict continue to shape their calculus today. Hadi, a southerner, was party to that conflict and ultimately escaped to Sana, where he later sided with the north in the civil war. So while there is no love lost for him in much of the south, at least one prominent secessionist has suggested that southerners think twice before fighting Hadi because they are afraid of invoking the tensions of 1986 at the expense of unity. Ali Mohsen, a northerner, would spur no such hesitancy—more likely, rallying against him would foster unity of purpose among an otherwise-fractured southern polity, potentially creating a new kind of war in the midst of the current one.

THREATENING COALITION COHESION

Ali Mohsen's track record also makes him unpalatable to the United States and the UAE, so his ascension could create issues within the coalition if not aptly anticipated. For Washington, he represents a part of the Yemeni establishment that has long been too close to al-Qaeda elements. For Abu Dhabi, his ties to the Muslim Brotherhood are a nonstarter. The UAE virulently opposes the Brotherhood and legally designated it as a terrorist group in 2014; Saudi Arabia followed suit but has generally accommodated local variants of the movement in a way the UAE refuses to do.

Ali Mohsen's affinity for the Brotherhood is rumored to stem from an educational stint in Cairo in the 1980s. He maintained his links with the group back home, cultivating a close relationship with the head of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood, Abdul Majid al-Zindani, whom the United States designated as a terrorist in 2004. Given Ali Mohsen's long, unabashed association with such extremists, Washington and the UAE were reportedly furious when he was appointed vice president.

ENDANGERING PEACE TALKS

If history is any guide, a peace delegation led by Ali Mohsen would be a point of contention with the Houthis. Hadi promoted him to vice president a week before Kuwait was scheduled to host a previous round of negotiations in 2016—a move that **stunted the talks (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/framing-yemen-peace-negotiations)**, which ultimately failed.

The Houthis regard Ali Mohsen as the primary offender behind the 2004-2010 Saada wars, which intensified after troops killed the popular religious and political leader Hussein al-Houthi, the movement's eventual namesake. They also detest his Salafi leanings. Beginning in the 1970s, Saudi Arabia funded Salafi Wahhabist clerics to set up in northern Yemen, a move that religious Zaidis saw as an encroachment on their way of life. The resulting Zaidi revivalist movement laid the foundation for the Houthi rebel group formed decades later, which regularly fought the Salafis. Prior to capturing Sana in 2014, the Houthis vigorously fought the Salafis and Islahis, many of whom had long been close to Ali Mohsen. Perhaps most telling, their first stop after entering Sana was the headquarters of his favored 1st Armored Division, though Ali Mohsen himself had already fled to Saudi Arabia.

Notably, the general detests the Houthis just as much as they detest him. This sentiment became more personal earlier this year, when Houthi forces captured his son, Mohsen Ali Mohsen, and put him under house arrest in Sana.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States should anticipate that Ali Mohsen may become Yemen's de facto leader during peace negotiations, even if only on a temporary basis. If Hadi's health worsens and he is incapacitated, the Yemeni constitution calls for the vice president to be elevated for as long as sixty days (after which elections must be held, though that thorny topic is beyond the scope of this PolicyWatch). Although Washington and the UAE have strong misgivings about Ali Mohsen, the coalition has repeatedly emphasized its support for Yemen's "legitimate" government, so it would be hard pressed to reject his constitutional right to interim leadership.

Ideally, U.S. policymakers will untangle this potential dilemma before it happens, addressing it with their coalition partners and directly with Hadi and Ali Mohsen. To start, Washington should encourage UN special envoy Martin Griffiths to resurrect proposals discussed in prior peace talks—and notionally agreed to by the Houthis—that envisioned a presidential council leading Yemen during an interim period rather than one-man rule. The question of whether Hadi and Ali Mohsen are included on this council would inevitably be a difficult part of negotiations, as it was in previous rounds when this plan was discussed.

The cloudy leadership situation may have a silver lining: those who know Ali Mohsen suggest he is pragmatic, non-ideological, and willing to listen to Saudi Arabia. According to one observer, the general understands that he is unlikely to be part of a future agreement in Yemen given his age (like Hadi, he is seventy-three), so he will not act as a spoiler. Others argue that he could not upend the process even if he wanted to because his power has waned significantly. Yet one enduring feature of the Middle East's post-Arab Spring landscape is the unwillingness of aging rulers to step aside, and their often-surprising ability to act as spoilers well past their prime. As such, the coalition should tread carefully, testing Ali Mohsen's pragmatism to ensure that peace talks do not get derailed again by leadership transition issues.

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