

## Yemeni Military Leader Tied to Terrorism Pledges to Protect Protesters

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**Yemeni president Saleh's long reign has been marred by corruption and despotism, presenting a less than ideal partner for Western governments, but the pedigrees of some of the most prominent candidates positioning themselves to replace him may be no better.**

Following a week of increasingly brutal attacks against anti-government protesters, including the killing of forty-five civilians at a rally on Friday, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh's grip on power seems to be crumbling. Key tribal and military leaders have openly defected to the opposition, including Sadiq al-Ahmar, head of the Hashid tribal federation, of which Saleh is a member, and Gen. Ali Abdullaha Aliewa, chief advisor to the supreme leader of the Yemeni army. Perhaps the most important defection to date, however, is that of Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Saleh's half-brother and commander of the 1st Armored Division and the northwest military district surrounding the capital, Sanaa.

General al-Ahmar is one of Yemen's most important military figures and is seen by some as a possible successor to Saleh. He has already deployed soldiers to a main square in Sanaa, vowing to protect protesters and positioning himself as defender of the Yemeni people. Yet General al-Ahmar is also paradigmatic of the challenges that the United States and Western governments will face if and when Saleh steps aside. His longstanding ties to militant and extremist organizations, both in Yemen and abroad, should be of great concern to the West, given the threat posed by the Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

According to press reports, in a 2005 cable the U.S. embassy in Yemen described Gen. Ahmar as "the most powerful" of the country's military leaders and a leading contender for president should Saleh fall out of favor. But the embassy also noted his "questionable dealings with terrorists and extremists." Such dealings have been known for some time, including suspicions that the general was involved in training terrorist recruits.

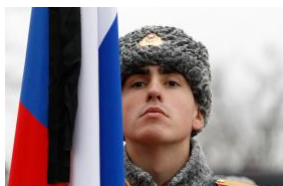
According to a November 2000 *New York Times* report, citing U.S. intelligence sources, "General al-Ahmar traveled to Afghanistan in the 1980s to meet Osama bin Laden, and assisted in recruiting militants from across the Muslim world for the Afghan struggle." General al-Ahmar was suspected of relocating from Afghanistan to Yemen those so-called "Afghan-Arab" mujahedeen no longer welcome in their home countries. Citing Yemeni and Western intelligence sources, the *Times* went on to state that the general "was in charge of \$20 million supplied by Mr. Bin Laden to help settle Arab Afghan fighters in Yemen." General al-Ahmar's ties to radical Islamists were reportedly solidified by his marriage to a sister of Tariq Nasr al-Fadhli, a prominent Afghan-Arab militant suspected of leading the cell behind one of the first documented al-Qaeda attacks: the failed attempt in December 1992 to bomb two hotels housing U.S. forces en route to Somalia. According to a primer on General al-Ahmar, he "trained partly in Iraq and [was] close to the Yemenite Muslim Brotherhood, he commands the artillery units of the Northerner army and is responsible for the defense of the Sanaa district."

Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar's ties to terrorist and extremist groups came under the spotlight in 2005, when his name came up in a series of wiretaps submitted as evidence in a 2005 terrorism-related trial in New York. In surreptitiously videotaped meetings in a Frankfurt hotel room in early 2003, Sheikh Mohammad al-Moayad, the head of the al Aqsa International Foundation in Yemen and Sheikh Mohammad al-Zayed, his assistant, discussed the possibility of obtaining compact discs of military training techniques through General al-Ahmar for the purposes of training terrorist recruits. Sheikh Moayad commented that they could seek out a Yemeni officer who took military training courses abroad, and "we'll ask him if he has discs...What he has in the area of training." Moayad further considered having al-Ahmar purchase such training material under the name of his military squadron and copying the material for the purpose of terrorist training. "Maybe we can buy them [training material on compact disks] from Europe, here, or there. We are not going to buy. We'll contact Commander Ali Muhsin [al-Ahmar]...He is a very nice man and he can purchase in the name of the first squadron....He'll buy in the name of the [Yemeni] Ministry of Foreign Affairs and it'll be shipped to them. And they'll copy them for us."

Of the various Middle East and North Africa countries undergoing protests and revolutions, Yemen presents some of the most perplexing challenges. President Saleh's long reign has been marred by corruption and despotism, and he presents a less than ideal partner for Western governments as well. But the pedigrees of some of the most prominent candidates positioning themselves to replace him may be no better -- and, indeed, they may be worse still.

Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's *Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11&newActiveSubNav=Stein%20Program%20on%20Counterterrorism%20and%20Intelligence&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D11&newActiveNav=researchP>)

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