

## Position Paper

# New balances: The army's exit from the political equation in Yemen

Al Jazeera Center for Studies

2 May 2013





In the largest process of change taking place in the Yemeni army since the ousting of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi issued a bundle of presidential resolutions seeking to reform the condition the army found itself in after the revolution, that is to rebuild its institutions, develop foundational frameworks to repair its relationship with the political arena, and turn it into a national, professional, and neutral institution beyond the influence of the centres of power and political bickering. The resolutions that have come to the fore since the revolution have, up to now, stemmed from infighting within the army. The revolution saw the balance of power shift with the loss of President Saleh and his family's control of the military institution. In exchange (and as a subsequent reaction to such loss) the position of President Hadi within the political system has been strengthened. The new conditions that have resulted from the resolutions are expected to affect the ongoing process of change in the country, with dialogue being used as a means of and facilitator for change.

### **Reforming the army**

In light of the state of division and sharp political and social polarisation, especially among some of the political parties, the Yemeni army plays the role of the sole guarantor of stability, the keeper of the unity of the country, and the protector of higher interests. The resolutions that sought to restructure and reform the institution of the army can be understood by its three main aspects:

1. The first and most important of which is ending the state of division in the army which had resulted from a large number of its members defecting and joining the youth of the revolution. This has been in order to dismantle the organisation of the Republican Guard affiliated with the previous regime (estimated to be thirty-three major generals in the special forces), the First Armored Brigade affiliated with the revolution (estimated to be twenty-three major generals), and distributing their seniority within the new organisational structure of the army.
2. The second aspect is rebuilding the institution of the army and addressing the deep structural and institutional imbalances resulting from the policies practiced by the former regime in the army over the last thirty-three years. The former regime transformed the army from a national institution into something akin to a feudal family, which the former president administered through a network of personal relationships and favoritism based on family, tribal loyalty and mutual benefits. Enlisting in the army and its military colleges was a privilege that favoured Saleh's tribe and tribes allied to him; groups who held the lion's share of these enlistments. Promotions and military ranks were awarded outside the criteria of seniority and military hierarchy - and sometimes as gifts with the purposes of affording satisfaction and earning loyalty - while appointment to leadership positions was made on the basis of loyalty rather than competence. After the war in the summer of 1994, the former regime carried out a series of actions and policies that increased its institutional fragility, the most important of which was the exclusion of thousands of soldiers and officers belonging to the southern provinces. Many of these soldiers were forced to take compulsory retirement, and the rest of them were given administrative or secondary advisory positions, effectively limiting their influence. Later, Saleh turned to handing out 'sensitive' positions in the military and security institutions to the younger generation of his family to prepare them for their roles. That move would serve as the main fissure in the Saleh regime, since his decision angered his allies, the elders of that tribe, and created an unspoken rift within the army. The revolution, however, brought this into the public eye. There are speculations that had it not been for this deep split in the narrow inner circle surrounding Saleh within the army - with a large part of it having joined the youth of the revolution - the revolution would still be struggling to achieve its objectives even to this day.
3. The third, and last, aspect aimed at restructuring is reforming the relationship of the army with the system of governance and politics through the exclusion and weakening of the centres of political power within it and turning it into a professional, neutral institution that serves the supreme interests of the state only (impartial to subsidiary loyalties) and not biased in favor of any political or social party. Although the restructuring resolutions have achieved an important

step in this aspect, reality indicates that this alone is not enough. There is an urgent need for further action. It takes time to introduce such broad changes, and before that there must be genuine political will and sincere intentions on the part of those wishing to transform the institution. The revolution showed a defect in the structural composition of the army; that social diversity within the army had diminished because President Saleh was the sole human arm of it for many years. There was an erosion of the awareness of the existent problem among those affiliated with the army, and they became less aware of the need to reform the infighting that was occurring, and the need to rebuild the organisation and the values and trends of loyalty among its constituents. Fixing these problems would enhance the function of the army as an institution for social integration, an institution that upholds national identity above sub-regional identities and partisan strife within the army. This required establishing a sense of justice and equality among its affiliates, strict adherence to institutional standards in the granting of promotions and appointments to positions, and activating the systems of accountability and the litigation system within the military to prevent internal fissures, and take just action on grievances.

### **The new balance of power**

The resolutions that sought restructuring modified and altered the former balance of power. Major General Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar, the most powerful man in the Yemeni army, was removed from the leadership of the First Armored brigade and appointed as advisor to the President for defense and security affairs while he was excluded by other military leaders affiliated with the revolution. However, Major General Ali Mohsen remained a senior consultant close to the president, because some held that his broad social and political relationships qualified him to continue influencing the internal dynamics of the coming period (albeit to a lesser degree than before). He also remained in the framework of the unspoken alliance with President Hadi and the trusted personal relationship that bound the two of them as well as the need for the latter to deal with what remained of Saleh's influence in the army, and to control the extremist voices of some of the traditional centres of power in the north.

On the other hand, the resolutions aimed at restructuring are on the verge of lowering the curtain on a long era of the dominance that the former president and his family held over the army and security institutions. This would be achieved with the removal of all of his remaining sons and relatives and those affiliated with him from their executive positions in the military and transferring them to advisory functions or diplomatic positions abroad. This includes Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the son of former President Saleh, the former leader of what was known as the Republican Guard. He was appointed ambassador extraordinaire to the United Arab Emirates, despite his blatant ambition to play a political role in the future and return to power through the ballot box.



This is likely to lead to the weakening of the political influence of President Saleh in the military, shrinking the layer of beneficiaries surrounding him who depend on his return to power, and also reducing the size of the financial resources available to him to buy loyalties. Furthermore, limiting the influence of President Saleh in his last political stronghold, the General People's Congress (the former ruling party), which is engaged in an unspoken struggle with President Hadi for his presidency, the latest of which seems to be an elastic split between two teams: the first supports Hadi's presidency, and demands internal reforms commensurate with the new changes, and the second – which is the strongest yet – supports the continuation of Saleh as head of the party. However, the majority of internal and external forces want Saleh to leave political life and hand the party over to his successor in order maintain its cohesion as an element of balance against the opposition Islah Party, the largest political party in Yemen, and the Joint Meetings Party, if it is destined to continue.

President Saleh is still ambitious to continue his political life, benefiting from an accumulation of political experience and his superior ability in these manoeuvres and political alliances. The General People's Conference remains a sole window that allows him to continue his political life. From the point of view of observers, unless there are large internal and external pressures put in place to force him to leave - and leave the position to his successor - he will continue to control the party so that conditions may even be poised to deliver his leadership to the most likely candidate; one of his sons.

The third party affected by the resolutions in the balance of internal forces is President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. These resolutions were supposed to strengthen his power within the political system by weakening the two parties in the equation which crystallised after the revolution and give him more power and real authority. This development has both pleased some and been the cause for concern in others. On the one hand, the restructuring resolutions made under the leadership of President Hadi directly affect large military forces, which are: the strategic reserve units (a group of missile brigades) and the special operations units (including special operations command, the special forces, units of counter-terrorism, a mountain infantry brigade, and elite strike forces), in addition to four presidential protection brigades, making some of them similar to smaller scale Republican Guards. These will be the only units allowed to stay in the capital, while the rest of the units will remain outside the political centre.

While the resolutions linked to this arrangement are subject to review every five years, or whenever the need arises, these forces are linked to the authority of President Hadi directly, and some do not consider this a legitimate reason to maintain these powers, while arguing that a 'transitional president' does not need it to practice his authority. Combine that with accusations that President Hadi, on occasion, makes sensitive

decisions within his inner circle and far from institutional frameworks, this does not bode well for critics. He appoints people close to him or people he knows personally to important positions, in a repeat of the model of the former president, raising fears in some that this may be the beginning of Saleh creating a new internal system or transferring power from Sanhan (the region of President Saleh) to Dathina (the region of President Hadi). There is a fear that he is seeking to exploit the transitional phase to strengthen his control over the political system, establishing centres of influence loyal to him within the army, and creating a permanent position to extend his influence beyond the transitional phase. This position may lead to imposing certain trends on the treatment of sensitive issues like the issue of the south and the federal options, or a return to forms of balances and quotas on the basis of region within the military and state institutions, laying the foundation for power sharing on the basis of geography between north and south. This would be a major obstacle to building an actual civil state in the long term, and a democratic system based on partisan political competition, not on the basis of conflict and competition between regional, social, or sectarian components.

Supporters of President Hadi are the majority of those downplaying these fears. They see most of President Hadi's decisions up to now as balanced, effective, and taking into account the existing complexities and the interests of the country in bringing these before the public at a commensurate pace. The southern leaders are becoming more absorbed as they are being appointed to four military zones out of the seven that are being developed in the restructuring, and others are being appointed to senior positions, in the context of reforming the imbalance in the leadership of the state and increasing the southerners' share of it after a long period of being subjected to exclusion and marginalisation. Therefore, strengthening the position of President Hadi is important to drive the wheel of change and preserve national unity in the face of separatist demands in the south. Although President Hadi wants to stay in power in the coming period, it does not seem like he is counting on achieving that by creating centres of power affiliated to him inside the army as his predecessor did. Rather he is looking to win the respect and affection of Yemenis. The facts indicate that repeating Saleh's model again is an unlikely option in light the situation inside Yemen, and in light of the liberal revolutionary wave that is sweeping the region.

### **Opportunities for change**

Restructuring as a key requirement for the forces of the revolution gives a strong impetus to the process of change taking place in the country in that it achieves the fourth goal of the youth revolution: rebuilding the military and security apparatuses on a national basis, and ensuring its impartiality in political processes. Although there are those that feel that people involved in the killing of youth in the revolution were given additional diplomatic immunity, and they were provided with the opportunity to manage

family investments abroad. However, the most important effect on the process of change comes from the fact that these resolutions reinforce the position of the President of the Republic and his ability to bring about promised change, by removing the former balance of power that blocked his movement, and that forced him, for a period, to take into account the wishes of the parties in the conflict. Today the president and the government have the ability to achieve progress in the areas of economy and security, reduce corruption in the state apparatus, and bring about real changes that meet the aspirations of the revolution in building a new reality.

Some estimates suggest that reforming the military will be the first domino that is needed to repair the rest of the state institutions, given that the military is the most important institution in the efforts to rebuild institutions of the state. The rule was that the traditional forces and other centres of influence adopted were done so in order to dominate power and wealth, and extend their influence to the rest of the institutions of the state. There are loud calls for the President to extend the reforms to the institutions of security, the judiciary, the media, and civil services, and to restructure them on the basis of a sound foundation built on the standards of good governance that is subjected to the law, and is transparent, accountable, and participatory.

It is expected that reforming the conditions of the military and security institutions will reflect the strengthening of their ability to control security in general, achieve stability, and end the acts of chaos and sabotage that affect the oil pipelines and electricity power infrastructure between the provinces, which have cost the Yemeni economy losses estimated at more than \$3 billion up to the end of the year 2012.

### **Ending fears**

Additionally the resolutions support comprehensive national dialogue as the main component for change, and have had a positive impact on the most important issues of the dialogue such as the issue of the south and the Houthi issue. Restructuring the army and restricting its influence on the political forces in the country gives assurances to the parties abstaining from participating so far, amplifying the importance of dialogue and the participation of all parties on an equal footing, impartial to any power or military influence. This may lead to the failure of dialogue or turn it into a formal dialogue between civil forces, while the actual dialogue will take place on the sidelines of the corridors of power. Entering into dialogue while the army is divided creates a risk to the security of the country and enhances the possibility of slipping into a civil war if the interlocutors fail to reach acceptable solutions to the resolve the core issues. The neutralisation of the army in the dialogue process and the existence of a unified command ensure the success of the dialogue and implementing its provisions. Everyone will have no choice but to continue the dialogue and negotiate until compromise and solutions are reached. The results that will be achieved through this would be the

drafting of a new constitution that seeks the opinion of the people, makes popular reference higher in all cases rather than the reference of the forces themselves involved in the dialogue, and limiting the extreme arguments of some of the parties. In the end, nothing will pass except for compromise and solutions that are accepted by most of the major popular forces stirring in the street.

Some of the southern forces were not as affected by the restructuring resolutions on the southern issue in that it was considered an issue unrelated to removing one person or a group from the centre of power, but rather related to a 'corrupt' military and tribal regime and a 'backward' social culture. The strongest impression is that the restructuring resolutions will have a positive effect on the southern issue from more than one side.

Perhaps the most important is that these resolutions strengthen the position of President Hadi within the political system and give him more legitimacy in the southern and eastern provinces, and weaken justifications of the forces that refuse to recognise his legitimacy on the grounds that he is merely a front for the centres of military power and northern tribal influence who hold the actual power. This legitimacy will, however, contribute to addressing the core of the southern issues that may prejudice the equitable distribution of power and wealth between the north and south, and the output from the policies of exclusion and marginalisation practiced by the former regime towards the people of the south. There are those who believe that strengthening the position of President Hadi will open the door to the southern civil and military elites being increasingly absorbed into the political system, gradually leading to filling the gap on this side, and contributing to addressing the imbalances and injustices that prevailed in the south during the previous period. The weakening of the traditional centres of power within the army gives a strong message that Yemen is moving to rebuild itself on a civil and just basis to accommodate everyone without marginalisation or exclusion.

As for the Houthi issue, the Houthis consider the resolutions a great victory for them with the removal of Major General Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar from his executive position as commander of the northwest military region, which is located in the provinces of Saada and Amran. They consider him primarily responsible for the preceding six wars that were mounted against them and as their primary enemy within the political system. However, the resolutions, on the other hand, deprived them of an important future ally with the removal of Brigadier General Ahmed Ali from the circle of military influence and the weakening of Saleh's political influence. According to observers, additional measures to neutralise the army and exclude it from sectarian and political conflicts will ease the Houthis' fear of the possibility of a seventh war waged against them, which would reduce their justifications to stockpile weapons and resort to a military option, and rather engage in dialogue as the sole feasible option for them to resolve the issue.



The restructuring is a landmark in the path of political transition in Yemen, because it has ameliorated the state of polarisation within the army, weakened the centre of power of former President Saleh, reinforced the authority of President Hadi. All of these transformations will open up more opportunities for Yemenis to agree to resolve disputes amongst themselves by peaceful means of compromise.

---

*Al Jazeera Center for Studies*

*Copyright © 2013 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.*

