



Will Washington Support “Baba Al-Qaeda” in Yemen?

Analysis Paper | July 2021

SOUTH 24

Farida Ahmed

South24 Center for News and Studies

The US State Department’s Declaration that Washington and the Pentagon intend to redeal with and build the “Yemeni Armed Forces”, the national army affiliated with Hadi Government, and to enhance its capacity, has stirred mixed reactions in the Yemeni street.

Washington justified such are engagement as being a step to support the American interests in combating terrorism, the violent extremist groups, and the illegal smuggling, as well as securing the navigation through Bab Al Mandab Strait. The most important reason, according to it, is that such a central support would increase Yemen’s capacity to face Iranian activities.¹

There are mixed positive and negative Yemeni responses towards the announcement. This is probably due to the lack of trust towards the National Army, with its failure to achieve any significant progress or victories for more than 6 years of war against the Houthis since 2015, because of accusations to its military leadership of corruption and the mismanagement. In a military event in Marib, the Defense Minister Mohammed Ali Al Maqdashy said that the actual troop number of the army represents 30% only of its “on paper” structure.² Registering fake names in the armed forces’ documents is an old corruption style in Yemen that benefits military leaders who seize the monthly salaries of those fake soldiers.

Moreover, the decision making of this army is being dominated by the Islah Party, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB)’s branch in Yemen. The army leader is the Yemeni Vice President General Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar who welcomed the American announcement, through its Twitter account, praising its positivity in combatting terrorism and extremism, and to confront Iran’s subversive activities, according to him.³ This opens the door to a lot of questions about the policy nature that the Biden Administration intend to adopt in Yemen, especially amid its intentions to end the Yemeni war through halting the American support of the Arab Coalition’s military operation, including the arms deals with KSA, and appointing the diplomat Tim Linderking as an American Special Envoy to Yemen.

So, how will the Biden Administration support the National Army despite its intentions to stop the military escalation among the disputing parties in Yemen, which have been proved by intensified diplomatic moves on more than one side? And will this cooperation be limited to combatting terrorism, or will be directed towards fighting the Houthis?

It should be said that the long relationships of General Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar with the extremist organizations, whether in Yemen and abroad, are a source of great concern, on the local and international levels; especially that the AQAP has regained its activity in areas controlled by the National Army, led by Al Ahmar and the Defense Minister, Al Maqdashy, considering them as safe havens and starting center for most of its recent operations and threats, particularly in the

¹ [2021 Trafficking in Persons Report - United States Department of State](#)

² [صحيفة الأيام - المقدشي: 70٪ من منتسبي الجيش في منازلهم \(alayyam.info\)](#)

³ [Twitter / "نائب رئيس الجمهورية يرحب بالقرار الأمريكي" auf Twitter: علي محسن صالح الأحمر](#)

governorates of Shabwa and Abyan, by targeting the Security Belt’s checkpoints in Abyan, and those of the Shabwani Elite.

According to American Intelligence reports, Al Ahmar’s relationships with the Qaeda started in the 1980s. They pointed out that Osama Bin Laden gave Al Ahmar 20 million dollars, during the latter’s visit to Afghanistan, to help him settle Arab Afghans’ fighters in Yemen, due to his high leadership position in the army. He also oversaw the participation of the Islamic militant groups, from the returning Afghans, in the 1994 Yemeni War between North and South. Their coalitions killed at least 10000 civilians in South Yemen, according to rights reports, based upon a pretext of “killing communist infidels backed by the Soviet Union”.

As a result, the existence of Arab Afghans in South Yemen has continued after the war, backed by the regime of Ali Abdullah Saleh, to use them in operations defending and protecting the unity.

Additionally, the capital city of Sanaa transformed into a mix of political, ideological, and religious contradictions, admittedly by the then Yemeni Foreign Minister, Abdulkarim Al Iryani, who declared that they helped the Jihadists during the 1994 War,⁴ then they decided to merge them within the governmental regime. This is evident also in the joining of most jihadists to Al Ahmar’s forces, to the extent that some of them were among the narrow circle of his close and trusted soldiers. Al Ahmar also oversaw the smuggling activities in Dhubab beaches in Taizz which overlook the Red Sea. Smuggling weapons to several militant Somali factions, and other groups in Eritrea and Ethiopia came on top of that.

Based on this background, the Yemeni Civil War, since 2015, has given the AQAP the opportunity to extend into regions with fragile security, allowing it to control more areas in Mukalla, the capital city of Hadhramaut, as well as Shabwa and Abyan. AQAP withdrew from Mukalla after one year of control, due to the intervention of the Arab Coalition, led by UAE, with the support of both Hadhrami and Shabwani Elites, in two operations dubbed as “Faisal” and “Decisive Sword” in the middle of February 2018.

This contributed to the recession of AQAP strength, as its elements headed to Wadi Hadhramaut as a safe haven.

External Link: [Al-Qaeda in Wadi-Hadhramaut: The Odds of Decline and survival \(south24.net\)](https://south24.net)

These are the same presence zones of the National Army, controlled by Al Ahmar and the Islah Party which previously shared the rule and the administration of Mukalla, with AQAP, through the “Hadhrami Civil Council” by leaders affiliated with it. Currently, AQAP’s activity is focused on the operational area of the First Military District, in Wadi Hadhramaut.

⁴ [Yemen Links to bin Laden Gnaw at F.B.I. in Cole Inquiry - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com)

The National Army and the AQAP in the same trench

Top leaders in the National Army have provided cover for AQAP’s moves within some fronts. Moreover, a lot of Extremist jihadist elements were among the National Army units in Marib and Shabwa, the eastern and northern fronts of Bayda “Al Sawmaah, Nati', Numan”, Qefa, Al Quraishyah District and Wald Rabi' District, before falling under the control of The Houthis according to a field military commander who spoke with “South24”.

The same military source told “South24” that the National Army’s leaders deal with the areas of AQAP’s solo control, without the army, as safe havens, especially in Quraishyah and Wald Rabi', controlled by AQAP since 2015 till 2020, when the Houthis have seized them.

Back to the past, based on this background, we can remember the American operation that targeted several Yakla houses in the northern governorate of Al Bayda, on Jan 29, 2017. At that time, the clashes resulted in the killing of 14 AQAP events, including three of its leaders, the top of which was Abduraouf Al zahab, one of AQAP’s Emirs in the governorate, according to the US Central Command.⁵

Accordingly, this clarifies the statements of General Mohsen Khasrof, the National Army’s Head of the Department of Moral Affairs. In an interview with a Saudi TV Channel, he declared that Al Zahab was in Marib days before his death, and that he received support from the National Army to activate the Qefa-Radaa front against the Houthis. This is a clear confession by a senior military leader in the National Army, of complicity between the army’s commanders and AQAP’s leaders in Bayda.⁶ (Watch the video)

The mutual coordination and support between the National Army and AQAP is confirmed by Hadi government’s Spokesperson Rajeh Badi’s statements to the same TV Channel who justified the falling of those areas (Quraishyah and Wald Rabi’ in Bayda’) into the Houthi hands. He attributed this fall to the existence of AQAP and ISIS there. He meant that those areas have not been in the hands of the National Army to protect them. This leads us to ask about why the National Army did not launch military operations against AQAP and ISIS there despite the spatial closeness of these districts which overlook the Marib Governorate?

Hadi government spokesperson’s statements gave the Houthis the advantage of their fight against terrorism, but at the same time showed the complicity of the National Army led by Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar with AQAP, and his turning a blind eye to the presence of the organization in the areas adjacent to him, revealing the fact of military cooperation between the army and "terrorist" organizations in Yemen.⁷ (Watch video).

⁵ [CNNArabic.com - مقتل 3 من قادة القاعدة في اليمن بعملية عسكرية أمريكية.. ومقتل جندي أمريكي إثر اشتباكات عنيفة: CNN مصادر لـ \(archive.org\)](https://www.cnn.com/2017/01/29/middleeast/yemen-isis-killings/index.html)

⁶ [العَمِيدُ مُحَسِّنُ خَصْرُوفُ يَكشِفُ عِلاَقَةَ قِيَادِي بِالقَاعِدَةِ مَعَ الجِيشِ الوَطَنِيِّ - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

⁷ [مُتحدِّثُ حُكُومَةُ هَادِي يَكشِفُ تَواطُئَ الجِيشِ عَن مَحَارِبَةِ القَاعِدَةِ فِي حُدُودِ تَوَاجُدِهِ العَسْكَرِيِّ - YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...)

The policy of General Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar in his dealings with AQAP elements is not different from his behavior prior to the latest war, in favoring them and giving them priority whenever he needs them. In a 2018-report, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy said that the Yemeni presidency, represented by the aging President Hadi, has been infiltrated by AQAP which enjoys Al Ahmar’s support.⁸ This reveals the dangerous role he would play on the political level, if he takes the presidential seat after Hadi, under any circumstances, or through his field military role by using his tools and his relationships with extremists.

The Army’s Systemic military indolence

Al Ahmar is linked to widespread corruption networks involved in the smuggling of oil derivatives in Yemen, as well as his management of a corruption system in the National Army since its establishment. This has led to systematic military indolence on many fronts, due to the association of the army leaders, affiliated with the Islah party, with a regional agenda which believes in the necessity of prolonging the war, and draining the Arab coalition, especially the KSA. This has shackled the army’s military operations, causing its decline as well as boosting the Houthis position in the conflict.

During the current battles in Al Bayda led by the Southern Giants Forces to liberate it from the Houthis, it was notable that National Army’s leaders refused to advance towards the capital, Sanaa, through the Bayda front in late 2015. They justified this under the pretext Al Bayda is a popular incubator for other political forces, and a resourceless governorate. The army leaders decided that it was not necessary to liberate it, because this might increase the burden on the Hadi government and its army, given Al Bayda’s large population which will require providing salaries and services that the Hadi government is unable to provide in other governorates.

On the other hand, according to what the military source told South24, the National Army does not want to liberate fronts, and does not plan for it, but it seeks to compete and undermine other national forces on many fronts. In 2015, Major General Ahmed Al Abara proposed to advance across the Al Bayda-Dhamar front, but he was eradicated along with 250 soldiers in his brigade in the Al Abr District. Through these proposals, national military leaders wanted to show that the state has a political project that ensures social support around it and guarantees that the war is managed by a military strategy to regain the capital against which the Houthis turned in 2014.

However, the agendas of the religious forces in the Hadi government began to fight the national leaders and got rid of them through their authority in the National Army, as happened in Marib, Taiz, and liberated southern regions.

⁸ [Yemen’s Second-in-Command May Have a Second Coming | The Washington Institute](#)

During the last battle in al-Zahir and Sawma’ah, it was not surprising that the National Army did not move any of its military units towards Al Bayda, although the fronts should have been moved south of Marib at least, in conjunction with the Houthis' preoccupation with other fronts, but this did not happen.

Back to 2018, there was a plan to entrust Tariq Saleh with the tasks of the Bayda front, but the Islah party quickly formed what it called the 151st Brigade, led by Saif Abd Al Rab Al Shaddadi, and entrusted him with this front from the direction of Marib. However, he did not achieve any significant progress, and the other national forces were prevented from liberating Al Bayda, according to the military source. This closed the door for Tariq Saleh towards any attempt to open “Khawlan-ALHada” front adjacent to al-Bayda, the nearest governorate to Sanaa, and which constitutes a popular, political, and tribal incubator for the General People's Congress.

The biggest preoccupation dominating the army leaders, charged with fighting the Houthis, has not been neither their battle with the Houthis nor their duty to combat terrorism, which found in the areas under their control a suitable environment for assembling its elements and organizing itself.

The army leaders have been accused of being more preoccupied with storing weapons outside the official lists and engaging in smuggling and organized corruption. A prominent example of such illegal interest of hoarding arms and money for personal benefit is the domination, by the senior leader Hashem Al Ahmar, who is close to Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar, over the Al Wadeeah port between Yemen and Saudi Arabia. It has become one of the main ports for import and export to and from Yemen, in addition to being a main outlet for people to cross out of the country. This has provided the army's corruption network with a very important financial source of income.

Controversial statements

The announcement about the American possible support for Hadi's forces and his Vice President comes in conjunction with the statements of the Chargé d'Affaires for the U.S. Embassy to Yemen, Cathy Westley who said: “Escalatory rhetoric and actions in Yemen’s southern governorates must end. We urge the parties to return to the dialogue focused on implementing the Riyadh Agreement”. She warned that “Those who undermine the security, stability and unity of Yemen are risking international censure”.

Some interpreted these statements as a response to the major July 8- demonstration in the city of Seiyun in Hadhramaut that called for the independence of South. Southerners criticized these statements which, as they believe, contradict the American policy, and violate the values of democracy and freedom to express peaceful opinions. However, others have interpreted the

statements as a threat to the other party in the government, specifically the Islah party, whose forces recently sought military escalation in Shabwa and Abyan in South.

It is more likely that the visit of the Saudi Deputy Defense Minister, Prince Khaled Bin Salman to the US, as the first one during the era of US President Biden, has conveyed the Saudi demands to pressure the STC and the Yemeni government to complete the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement’s items, besides efforts to end the war in Yemen, and the cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

Yemeni military parties have not taken seriously the US State Department's statements regarding possible support for the "Yemeni Armed Forces "as they considered it to be mere intentions amid the American pressure to push the Houthis to the negotiating table.

How can the Biden Administration direct its institutions and intelligence services to restore military support with the mentioned mechanism, even though it is totally aware of the military fragility of the National Army, which has been infiltrated by extremist groups, in addition to its prior knowledge of the history of General Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar, and his direct ties with "terrorist" groups inside and outside Yemen until now? This will be a fatal strategic American mistake, which may cause the failure of US’S foreign policy, and add military burdens beyond its capacity. This would repeat the policies of previous administrations in dealing with the same officials involved in fueling the activity of extremist groups and providing cover for it over the years in Yemen.

Prior to 2010, the US was directly supervising the Anti-Terrorism Squad in the Yemeni Central Security (Private Security), consisting of 400 personnel. It was responsible for training, arming, feeding and granting bonuses to its members, independently of the units of the former Yemeni regime army, according to the military source who spoke with "South24". Despite the apparently good relations of the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh with the American administration in the field of combating terrorism, and the relative stability of Yemen’s institutions at that time, Washington obliged him not to transfer support to any other tasks rather than combating terrorism.

Currently, in the midst of war, insecurity and instability in many areas of Yemen, including the areas under the control of the Hadi government, there is a question that would impose itself about how the Biden administration will direct military support to military parties in the National Army led by General Al Ahmar and the Islah Party, who proved to be unreliable in many situations, contrary to the other reliable military formations in South, including the Security Belts in Aden, Lahj and Abyan, and the two STC’S Elites in Shabwa and Hadhramaut, which fought AQAP in two successful operations in 2018, and made progress in the areas they control? The 2019 International Experts Report praised the role of the Security Belt Forces and

the Shabwani and Hadhrami Elites in combating terrorism, describing them as “the most active forces in the fight against AQAP and ISIS in the Arabian Peninsula”.⁹

Does Biden follow the footsteps of his predecessor, Obama?

During the era of former Democratic President Obama, the American administration engaged in a political partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood in many Arab countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, and even supported them to reach power. On the other hand, former US President Donald Trump adopted a vision that considered political Islam movements, top of which is the Muslim Brotherhood, as groups of no less dangerous than extremist organizations.¹⁰

There have been relentless efforts by the Trump Administration to classify the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization. However, those attempts failed due to legal and institutional obstacles that prevented adding the group to the US terror list, and for other reasons including the complexities that could occur between Washington and Ankara, if the group is included in the list, noting that Turkey is a NATO’s ally, and simultaneously, a MB’S ally in many Arab countries, including Yemen.

However, this did not change Trump's view towards the Brotherhood. Seemingly, this was the reason behind Saudi, Egyptian and an Emirati comfort towards Trump's policies, before the relationship was reset with Biden’s ascending to power.

Apparently, Joe Biden is on his way to adopt the same visions of his Democratic predecessor Obama regarding political Islam groups, viewing the MB, as a moderate alternative to more violent Islamist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. It seems that General Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar and the Islah party, the Muslim Brotherhood branch in Yemen, are betting on the Biden Administration to revive the political Islam project in the region again, by adopting the usual Democratic soft power policy to settle crises, in contrast to the hard power adopted by the Republicans in the Middle East.

Accordingly, we can deduce the dangerous risks awaiting Biden administration by its intentions of military support for the National Army led by General Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar, dubbed as “Baba Al-Qaeda” in Yemen, according to the French newspaper Liberation,¹¹ because of his support and containment of extremist groups for many years, until his last days in Sanaa.

The “Iman University” run by extremist Jihadists who had fought in Afghanistan, such as its president, Abdul Majid al-Zindani, is based in the First Armored Division's headquarters. Just 4

⁹ skynewsarabia.com (النخبة الشيوانية .. أدوار وأهداف | أخبار سكاى نيوز عربية)

¹⁰ [عربي BBC News - "منظمة إرهابية" إدارة ترامب تعمل على تصنيف الإخوان المسلمين](http://www.bbc.com/news/islamic-affairs-55111111)

¹¹ [Journaliste tué au Yémen : la piste d'une alliance entre le gouvernement et Al-Qaeda – Libération \(liberation.fr\)](http://liberation.fr)

meters high wall separates the University from the Division armory. Thus, the Division provides the university with military protection within its surroundings, giving it a political cover to carry out its activity by graduating generations of extremists whose affiliation to the Islah party is a precondition. Additionally, letters of recommendation were a requirement for new applicants of Iman University.

This link between the First Armored Division and the Islah Party is an extension of Ali Mohsen Al Ahmar's link with the Arab Afghans and the MB, which Arab countries, including the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt classify as a "terrorist" group. According to frequent comments, it is the same group that dominates the decision making within the Hadi government.

Consequently, the question, whose answer will identify the nature of the US's objectives in its war against “terrorism” in Yemen, is: To what extent can Congress agree to allocate military funds to the Biden Administration, relevant to combating terrorism in Yemen, without knowing where to go and to whom? Given that one of the priorities of US policy through its various previous administrations is to fight “terrorist” organizations in the Middle East, especially Yemen because of the presence of the AQAP there, one of the most dangerous extremist organizations in the world, whose danger exceeds the local and regional levels to attempts to harm the US within its own soil.

Instead, it is possible to rely on other military alternatives in South, including the Security Belts in Aden, Lahj and Abyan, and the two Hadhrami and Shabwani Elites, which have proven their reliability in the fight against “terrorism”, and contributed to liberate extended geographical areas from the danger of extremist religious groups, whether AQAP, ISIS, or the Houthis.

Farida Ahmed

Resident fellow with South24 Center for News and Studies, researcher on political affairs

Photo: Vice President Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar during a meeting with the Commander of the Central American Naval Forces, Commander of the Fifth Fleet, Rear Admiral Brad Cooper, June 30, 2021 (official - Twitter)

Note: Special appreciation to the military field commander source for his cooperation in providing military information to “South24” in condition of anonymity fearing his life.

South24 Center for News and Studies



south24.net
admin@south24.net

[All rights reserved to South24 Center]