

After a Long Silence: Is Ahmed Ali Preparing for a New Battle in Yemen?



In the wake of the popular uprisings of 2011, several Arab leaders were ousted from power among them, the presidents of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen. While Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali ended up in exile, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was imprisoned, and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi was killed in armed conflict,

Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh managed to negotiate a political agreement to transfer power peacefully to his deputy.

Following the transfer of power, a new government was formed in Sana'a in December 2011. Several military leaders were removed from their posts, while others were reassigned. As part of this restructuring, the Saleh family lost much of its military influence, unable to retain their longstanding positions.

Among them was the president's son, Brigadier General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had commanded the Republican Guard for many years before 2011. His forces were estimated to number around 80,000 soldiers.

In 2013, Ahmed Ali, the former commander of the Republican Guard, was appointed Yemen's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates a political move widely seen as an effort to sideline him from both the political and military arenas.

He took up the new post without any public friction with the transitional government. But in 2015, he was dismissed from his position and has since held no official role.

Throughout his years in exile, Brigadier General Ahmed Ali remained silent, refraining from commenting on Yemen's unfolding crises including the collapse of the government in Sana'a and the Houthi takeover, which saw the group expand its control across multiple provinces in 2015 through a political alliance with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The internationally recognized government fled first to Aden, and then abroad.

Prior to the 2011 protests, former President Saleh had been a fierce opponent of the Houthis. However, he entered into a temporary alliance with the group, which eventually fell apart in 2017 during violent clashes in Sana'a. That confrontation ended with Saleh's assassination at the hands of the Houthis. In the aftermath, his son Ahmed issued a brief statement mourning his father's death but did not appear publicly.

The Saleh family once the ruling dynasty of Yemen for over three decades—found itself at its weakest point. Key relatives fled after the Houthi military victory in Sana'a, while Ahmed remained in the UAE, keeping a low profile and avoiding the media.

Despite his silence, the Houthis viewed him as a threat. In late July this year, a military court in Sana'a sentenced Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh to death, convicting him of "treason, espionage, and collaboration with the enemy," as well as corruption. The verdict also included the confiscation of his assets.

Yemeni political analyst Adel Al-Shujaa viewed the sentence as a tactical

provocation meant to force Ahmed Ali out of silence and into confrontation. “Silence is no longer enough, and neutrality is no longer an option,” he said. “With this ruling, the Houthis are pushing Ahmed Ali to the brink of confrontation and stripping him of any middle ground.”

Breaking the Silence

On September 25, Ahmed Ali broke his silence with a televised address—the first time he had spoken publicly on Yemeni affairs. In his speech, he articulated a clear stance against the Houthis, marking a potential turning point that many interpreted as the beginning of a new political chapter.

“We affirm with certainty and bring good news to our people that the day of salvation from these militias is very near,” he said. “Our people, who once rose up against the tyrannical imams, will rise again to reclaim their freedom and dignity.”

He added: “We renew our promise to remain loyal to our principles and to stand by our people in pursuit of their aspirations. No matter how hard the challenges, the long night will pass, and a new dawn will rise.”

Ahmed Ali appears to hold several strategic advantages. He enjoys considerable popular support within Yemen and is seen as aligned with regional powers central to the Yemeni file particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Additionally, several of his relatives command active military units on the ground.

There is also increasing regional and international hostility toward the Houthis, particularly after their attacks on global shipping routes in the Red Sea, which have caused substantial losses to major multinational companies.

Divided Public Opinion

Yemeni public opinion remains divided over Ahmed Ali’s reemergence. While some interpret his speech as the beginning of a new phase for Yemen, others dismiss it as mere rhetoric with little impact on the ground.

Abdulkarim, a university student in Sana’a, told Noon Post: “Ahmed Ali has a good reputation in Yemen and is respected by millions. Many still believe he could be a unifying figure across both north and south, as he was never a direct party to the war that’s plagued Yemen for the past decade.”

He noted that all warring factions in Yemen have failed to deliver even basic services once provided under Saleh’s rule. “Many now believe that life under Saleh was better than the current situation,” he added. “There’s hope among some that the return of the Saleh family could bring stability.”

Before Saleh’s downfall, Yemen remained unified. Elections however flawed

were held, education was better, salaries were paid on time, and job opportunities were more available, according to Abdulkarim.

Hussein, another resident of Sana'a, disagrees. He believes the Saleh era is over for good. "It's illogical for Yemenis to fight for ten years only to accept the return of remnants of the old regime," he said. "Yemen wasn't a wealthy or powerful state under Saleh, so why would we want to go back? We will resist any attempt to bring Ahmed Ali back to power."

Enormous Challenges

Ten years of war have left Yemen deeply fragmented a country riddled with armed factions, weak state institutions, and conflicting foreign agendas. Any political or military figure, including Ahmed Ali, would face massive obstacles in trying to end the war or rebuild the state. Addressing these challenges would require both local unity and robust regional and international backing.

The most daunting challenge is the military strength of the Houthis, who have withstood the Saudi-led coalition since 2015. After more than six years of fighting, both sides agreed to a fragile truce in April 2022, which remains in place to this day.

Over the past decade, the Houthis have dramatically expanded their military capabilities, particularly in drone and ballistic missile technologies. They have also mobilized hundreds of thousands of fighters from across the territories under their control. A renewed battle against the group would demand not only strategic planning but extensive military preparations.

Even Houthi adversaries acknowledge the group's growing strength. In late September, Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth reported that Israel's security establishment had observed significant advances in Houthi military capabilities.

"In recent months, Israeli intelligence has monitored the development of long-range drones and missiles built using Iranian expertise and local engineers," the paper reported.

It also noted the Houthis' use of underground facilities for production and storage as part of a broader defensive strategy.

Another critical challenge lies in the internal divisions among anti-Houthi factions. While several military forces operate across government-held territories, there is no unified military command. Each force controls its respective area with little coordination.

Southern forces take direction from the Southern Transitional Council, a separatist body advocating for independence. Meanwhile, Brigadier General Tareq Saleh leads military units in Mokha, and thousands of fighters are stationed

in Marib and Taiz. Achieving unified command under one leadership remains elusive due to deep ideological and political rifts.

According to the US-based magazine *The Maritime Executive*, the Saudi-backed government and its affiliated forces pose little threat to the Houthis. “Most anti-Houthi warlords are more focused on securing personal economic benefits from foreign donors than in resolving disputes for the sake of national unity,” the magazine wrote.

It added that the internationally recognized government has long ceased to be a viable alternative to the Houthis. “What little unity once existed among the anti-Houthi factions is eroding. This is evident on the ground, where frontlines have remained static for years.”

With Ahmed Ali’s reemergence in Yemen’s political landscape, the central question remains: Can he alter the military equation and return to the forefront with greater power and influence? While that may be possible, it would require broad regional and international support, along with political consensus and military cooperation from key local actors.