

id: 222993
date: 8/31/2009 13:39
refid: 09SANAA1617
origin: Embassy Sanaa
classification: SECRET//NOFORN
destination: 09SANAA1486|09SANAA299
header:
VZCZCXRO5099
RR RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR
DE RUEHYN #1617/01 2431339
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
R 311339Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2697
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0105
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 1035
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0259
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 1662
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH 0439
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC

----- header ends -----

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 001617

SIPDIS
NOFORN

DEPT FOR NEA/ARP ANDREW MACDONALD
NSC FOR AARON JOST
OSD/POLICY FOR BRIAN GLENN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/31/2019
TAGS: PGOV, PREL, PINS, ECON, SA, UK, GM, YM
SUBJECT: YEMEN: HAMID AL-AHMAR SEES SALEH AS WEAK AND
ISOLATED, PLANS NEXT STEPS

REF: A. SANAA 1486
B. SANAA 299

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Hamid al-Ahmar, Islah Party leader, prominent businessman, and de facto leader of Yemen's largest tribal confederation, claimed that he would organize popular demonstrations throughout Yemen aimed at removing President Saleh from power unless the president "guarantees" the fairness of the 2011 parliamentary elections, forms a unity government with leaders from the Southern Movement, and removes his relatives from positions of power by December 2009. Ahmar told EconOff on August 27 that Saleh is now more politically isolated than ever, deprived of the counsel and support of former allies, and beleaguered by more threats to regime stability than he can handle. Ahmar said he would

work hard in the coming months to convince Northwest Regional Commander Major General Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, as well as the Saudi government, to support the opposition. By his own admission, however, Ahmar still lacks the necessary support, even within his own opposition Dialogue Committee, to launch broad-based anti-Saleh demonstrations. END SUMMARY.

GOVERNANCE REFORMS...OR ELSE

2. (C) Reiterating comments he made during an August 5 al-Jazeera interview (REF A), Hamid al-Ahmar, Islah Party leader, prominent businessman, Member of Parliament, and de facto head of the Hashid tribal confederation, told EconOff on August 27 that he had given President Saleh until the end of 2009 to "guarantee" the fairness of the 2011 elections, form a unity government with the Southern Movement, and remove his relatives from military leadership positions. Absent this fundamental shift in Saleh's governance of the country, Ahmar will begin organizing anti-regime demonstrations in "every single governorate," modeled after the 1998 protests that helped topple Indonesian President Suharto. "We cannot copy the Indonesians exactly, but the idea is controlled chaos." Ahmar said he had conveyed his ultimatum to Saleh through Ahmar's brothers (NFI) in early August, but had not yet received a response from the president or his inner circle.

3. (C) Saleh is now at his weakest point politically, besieged by threats on multiple fronts and without the political support and counsel of key allies, according to Ahmar. "(Presidential advisor Abdulkarim) al-Eryani is not as honest nor as useful as he used to be, (Northwest Regional Commander) Ali Muhsin (al-Ahmar) is no longer his ally, and Sheikh Abdullah is no longer in the picture," he said, referring to his late father, the former Speaker of Parliament and Saleh's key ally vis--vis the tribes. "Who is left? He is all alone." Ahmar conceded that Saleh is unlikely to meet any of his three conditions. "There's really no way to verify that Saleh is serious about free and fair elections, but I won't wait until the 2011 elections to move forward."

SAUDIS, ALI MUHSIN KEY TO AHMAR'S PLANS

4. (S/NF) Removing Saleh from power in a scenario that does not involve throwing the country into complete chaos will be impossible without the support of the (currently skeptical) Saudi leadership and elements of the Yemeni military, particularly MG Ali Muhsin, according to Ahmar. "The Saudis will take a calculated risk if they can be convinced that we can make Saleh leave the scene peacefully." Denying any personal ambition to lead the country, Ahmar said that Yemen needs a president from one of the southern governorates and that the Saudis would eventually come around to the idea. "If the Saudis were going to put anyone in power instead of Saleh, it would be me -- everyone knows I am close to them)- but I told them the next president must be a southerner, for the sake of unity."

5. (S/NF) While Ali Muhsin's support is essential to the success of any plan to remove Saleh, he should not be allowed to lead the country, Ahmar told EconOff. "Ali Muhsin is a good, honest man, but the last thing we need is another military man as president." Ahmar said he would seek to exploit a rift between Saleh and Ali Muhsin, claiming that the president had given Ali Muhsin the impossibly difficult Sa'ada mission with the explicit intention of ruining his military career, and therefore his presidential ambitions, and hopefully have him killed in the process. Ahmar stressed that he was only in the early stages of discussions with Ali Muhsin on the topic of undermining Saleh's rule.

BAD LEADERSHIP, FAILURE IN SA'ADA WILL TURN THE MILITARY

6. (S/NF) Ahmar predicted that the failure of the current military campaign in Sa'ada, along with the continued presence of Saleh's relatives in positions of leadership, would eventually cause Saleh to lose the military's loyalty. Deriding Saleh's son, Special Operations Forces Commander Ahmed Ali, and his nephews Tariq, Yahya, and Ammar, as "clowns" who keep the loyalty of their men only by providing opportunities for corruption, Ahmar said the military would not stay in the barracks indefinitely if it saw fighting in Sa'ada as a futile enterprise under Saleh's command. Ahmar compared the ROYG forces currently in Sa'ada to the various Ahmar-allied Hashid confederation tribes that had fought against the Houthis during previous campaigns. (Note: GPC Member of Parliament and Hashid leader Hussein al-Ahmar, Hamid's brother, recently met with members of the "Hashid Popular Army" that fought on behalf of the ROYG in the last round of fighting in Sa'ada, according to an August 30 press report. End Note.) "A lot of blood was shed to make Sa'ada Yemeni and now Saleh is close to wasting it all. Saleh has lost the tribes and, this time, he will lose the military." The only solution in Sa'ada is to arrest Houthi leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi, according to Ahmar.

A VISION FOR ISLAH GOVERNANCE

7. (C) Repeating comments he has made to EmbOffs in the past, Ahmar described the Islah Party as a moderate force within Yemeni society and described himself as a moderating element within Islah's leadership. Islah will govern like the Turkish Welfare Party and "nobody fears extremism from Turkey," Ahmar said. The only things Islah would impose upon Yemeni society are a ban on the sale of alcohol and on prostitution and escort services. "No one will be forced to wear the headscarf and Yemenis will be allowed to do whatever they want in their own homes)- bring your girlfriend home and drink -- but just don't do it public," Ahmar said. (Note: Alcohol sales outside Western hotels are already banned in Yemen. Islah regularly pushes the ROYG, with some

success, to shut down massage parlors in Sana'a that are widely regarded as prostitution sites. End Note.) Ahmar asked what concerns, if any, the U.S. has with Islah's platform and offered to make any changes that would ensure U.S. support for Islah.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

8. (C) Hamid al-Ahmar comes across as a confident, polished interlocutor and speaks fluent English, despite having been to the U.S. only twice, as a teenager. He is the most ambitious of the 10 sons of the late Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar, evidenced by his increasingly frequent public appearances. His disgust with President Saleh, whom he alternately refers to as "the devil" and "the greedy one," is palpable and frequently expressed in conversations. Ahmar views his late father's support for Saleh with disdain and seems to relish the fact that Saleh no longer has any powerful tribal allies equal in stature to his father. Ahmar and his family of Hashid tribesmen hail from Amran

SANAA 00001617 003 OF 003

governorate and claim Ali Muhsen al-Ahmar as a blood relative -- "my tenth cousin, no closer," according to Ahmar. President Saleh, born in the Bayt al-Ahmar village in the Sanhan district, is not a blood relative of the Amran Ahmars (REF B). Ahmar claims to talk to the president in person and on the telephone "regularly."

9. (S/NF) Ahmar, who splits his time between Jeddah and a palatial estate in Sana'a, is intimately involved in the everyday dealings of the disparate subsidiaries and affiliates of the business conglomerate he chairs -- the Ahmar Group. Post estimates that the majority of his official revenue stream comes from earnings at his telecom company Sabafon, the Saba Islamic Bank, various import-export companies, and his partnership with Siemens in the power sector. To a lesser extent, he also derives income from serving as the local agent for the London-based commodity trading company Arcadia Petroleum, which regularly buys most of the ROYG's monthly crude oil share, and from owning a string of Western fast-food restaurants. A number of our contacts, including Ahmar's brother-in-law Nabil Khamery, have suggested that Ahmar, like his late father, receives generous cash payoffs from the Saudi Government, which he collects in Jeddah rather than through the Saudi Embassy in Sana'a.

COMMENT

10. (S) Hamid al-Ahmar has ambition, wealth, and tribal power in abundance, a fiery combination anywhere but especially in Yemen. Despite his increasingly confrontational statements in public and conspiratorial tone in private, however, Ahmar realizes that he is in no position to seize power. By his own admission, even members of the opposition Dialogue

Committee he leads are skeptical of the utility of mass demonstrations targeting Saleh personally. Judging by his non-reaction to Ahmar's public call for him to resign, Saleh is unlikely to view Ahmar's latest ultimatum, conveyed privately, as anything more than a mild irritation. It is unclear how the military, supposedly chafing under the command of Saleh's son, nephews, and other Sanhan loyalists, fits into Ahmar's strategy of popular opposition protests. Ahmar will likely remain a vocal opposition politician and a businessman before all else. As a tribal leader from the rival Bakil confederation recently put it to us: "What if Hamid tries to overthrow President Saleh and fails? He'd end up weaker than before and never recover." END COMMENT.
SECHE

=====CABLE ENDS=====