

## The new unity government in Yemen under attack

**Shaul Shay**

(Senior research fellow at the International Institute for Counterterrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya and former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council)

**Copyright:** Research Institute for European and American Studies  
([www.rieas.gr](http://www.rieas.gr)) Publication date: 17 January 2021

**Note:** The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies (RIEAS)

At least 25 people were killed and 110 wounded in an attack on Aden airport on December 30, 2020, moments after a plane carrying newly formed Saudi-backed cabinet for government-held parts of Yemen. The Yemeni government and Saudi Ambassador to Yemen Mohammed Said al-Jaber were safely transferred to Aden's presidential Maasheeq palace.<sup>1</sup> The country's internationally recognized government said the Iran-backed Houthi rebels had fired missiles at the airport and Yemen's prime minister said that the missile attack on the airport in Aden was meant "to eliminate" the country's new government as it arrived in Aden.<sup>2</sup> Houthi officials have denied any role in the attacks and have sought to blame unspecified groups in the Saudi-led coalition. The rebel leaders have not offered any evidence or answered requests for comment to back up their claims.

Aden is the second-largest airport in Yemen after Sanaa which is under the control of the Iran-backed Houthis. Three precision-guided missiles had struck the facility, targeting the airplane, the arrival hall and the VIP lounge of the airport.<sup>3</sup> A video footage shows what appears to be a missile strike followed by a ball of intense flames, in part of the airport which moments before had been packed with crowds.<sup>4</sup> The prime minister said Yemeni investigators have collected the remains of the missiles and that experts from the Arab Coalition and the US would help determine the type and origins of the missiles.

The Yemeni Interior Ministry said on January 14, 2021 that the missiles which were used to attack Aden's airport were ballistic and they were launched from a site 100 kilometer away from the airport, in Houthi-controlled areas. The Ministry said "Iranian and Lebanese experts" are behind the missiles which were used in the attack.<sup>5</sup>

### The second attack

Hours after the attack in the airport, Yemeni military intercepted and destroyed an explosive-laden drone near Aden's Maasheeq presidential palace where the cabinet members including Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik, as well as the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, had been taken to safely.<sup>6</sup>

There was no claim of responsibility and the Houthis quickly denied their involvement in the attack but Yemen's Foreign Ministry blamed the Houthis for the attack, pointing out that the same technology and techniques had been employed in previous attacks by the militia across Yemen. Maj. Gen. Ibrahim Ali Haydan, the new interior minister, said the Houthis were responsible for the attack and that the investigation he is heading up would reveal more details.<sup>7</sup>

Arab Coalition spokesman Col. Turki al-Malki said "the joint forces shot down and destroyed the bomb-laden drone launched by the terrorist Houthi militias to target Maasheq palace. He said such a "desperate terrorist attempt" confirms the responsibility of the Iran-backed Houthis for the attack on Aden airport that happened moments after a plane landed carrying the newly formed Yemeni cabinet."<sup>8</sup>

During the first meeting of his government in Aden, Yemeni Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed said initial information showed that military experts from Iran had launched the guided missiles that hit Aden airport killing or wounding dozens of people.<sup>9</sup>

Iran condemned the deadly attack on Aden airport. Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh condemned "foreign actors" who have involved themselves in the fray. "Such acts of violence and the killing of civilians are the result of the mentality of aggressors and occupiers of Yemen, who, in the name of a self-styled coalition, have destroyed the whole of Yemen, and with their bellicose and secessionist views, have perpetuated the most heinous human crisis in Yemen," he said.<sup>10</sup>

The UN special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, condemned the explosions as an "unacceptable act of violence". He said, in a tweet, that it was "a tragic reminder of the importance of bringing Yemen urgently back on the path towards peace."<sup>11</sup>

Martin Griffiths, arrived on January 6, 2021 to Aden and was taken on a tour by Aden Governor Ahmed Lamlas and several high-ranking security officials to observe the amount of damage inflicted on the city's main airport. Martin Griffiths also held talks with Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, Minister of Foreign and Expatriate Affairs Ahmed Bin Mubarak and other members of Yemen's newly-formed cabinet. Griffiths had expressed hopes that the formation of a new Yemeni cabinet could "mark the beginning of recovery after a perilous year."<sup>12</sup>

### **The response of the government of Yemen and the Arab coalition**

Yemeni Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, affirmed that the government is in the temporary capital, Aden, to remain and to exercise all its duties and actions which are supported by the will of the people. In a video, the Prime Minister clarified that the "treacherous, cowardly and terrorist attack" that targeted Aden International Airport coinciding with the arrival of the president and members of the government of political competencies puts the government at the heart of its responsibilities, which is the task of ending the coup, restoring the state, and spreading stability and recovery throughout our country.<sup>13</sup>

On December 30, 2020, the Arab coalition launched retaliatory strikes on Houthi military sites in the capital, Sanaa, and surrounding areas, including Sanaa airport, Al-Dailami airbase and several other sites in and around the city. Houthi-run Masirah television said the planes hit at least 15 locations in different districts in the capital.<sup>14</sup>

Yemeni troops have secured the area linking the ministers' residence in al-Maashiq palace in Aden and their workplace in the cabinet secretariat, where the government is expected to hold intensive meetings.<sup>15</sup>

Following the attack, Aden International Airport was closed in order to carry out essential repairs and safeguards and Yemenia, the country's flagship carrier, had diverted flights from Aden to Seiyun airport in the southeastern province of Hadramout. On January 3, 2021, the airport received a flight from national airline Yemenia, which arrived from Sudan's capital Khartoum, the first commercial flight to arrive since the deadly missile attack.

Yemeni Interior Minister Ibrahim Haidan had said the speedy reopening of the airport has underscored "the determination of the government to overcome obstacles and face the difficulties" caused by the missile attack.<sup>16</sup>

A Saudi-backed team of engineering experts has been drafted in to assess and repair the damage to Aden's airport following the deadly missile attack. The specialists' work is being carried out as part of the Saudi Program for the Development and Reconstruction of Yemen (SDRPY).

### **The new government**

Yemen's internationally recognized government has worked mostly from self-imposed exile in the Saudi capital of Riyadh during the country's years-long civil war.<sup>17</sup> In August 2019, the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), an umbrella group of militias seeking to restore an independent southern Yemen, which existed from 1967 until unification in 1990, seized control of Aden and refused to allow the cabinet to return to its temporary home in Aden. Saudi Arabia brokered a power-sharing deal in November 2019 but the agreement was never implemented and there were fresh clashes this April when the STC declared self-rule in southern Yemen.<sup>18</sup>

The separatists rescinded their declaration three months later and agreed to revive the power-sharing deal after receiving a commitment that there would be equal representation for northerners and southerners in the 24-member cabinet. The two sides also agreed on the separation of forces inside Aden.<sup>19</sup>

Yemen's internationally recognized and Saudi-backed government and southern separatists backed by the UAE formed a new power-sharing cabinet and sworn in by Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi in Saudi Arabia on December 18, 2020. President Hadi's reshuffle was seen as a major step toward closing a dangerous rift between Hadi's government and southern separatists.

The new government includes ministers loyal to Hadi and supporters of the secessionist Southern Transitional Council, as well as other parties. Saudi Arabia has been encouraging the unity government to quell the "war within a civil war" and to bolster the coalition against the Houthi insurgents.<sup>20</sup>

The new cabinet will focus on development, salvaging the country's economy, and uniting ranks to face the nationwide challenge staged by Houthi militias. During his first meeting with members of the new government, President Hadi has highlighted the need to unite military forces to confront the Houthi threat, face economic challenges and improve public services. The leader also stressed on continuing to implement the Riyadh Agreement, especially stipulations on weapons and military operations. He recognized Saudi Arabia as

the main supporter of Yemen and voiced hope that the rest of the international community stands by the new government.<sup>21</sup>

### Summary

Yemen has been engulfed in civil war since 2014, when the Shiite Houthi rebels overran the north and Sanaa. The following year, a Saudi-led military coalition intervened to wage war on the Houthis and restore Hadi's government to power.

The new Yemeni government was formed under the auspices of Saudi Arabia, which leads the military coalition against the Iran-backed Houthis. Yemen has accused the Houthis and Iranian military experts of masterminding the deadly attack on Aden's airport aimed "to eliminate" the country's new government as it arrived in Aden.<sup>22</sup>

Despite what is projected as a united front between UAE and Riyadh, cracks in the Saudi-Emirati alliance showed in 2019 – 2020 after the UAE-backed separatist Southern Transitional Council turned on Hadi.

The power-sharing deal was designed to unify Saudi-backed government and UAE-backed separatist forces but the anti-Houthi alliance on the ground has deep differences that may not be easy to overcome and the attack on Aden airport reflects the scale of challenges facing the Yemeni authorities.

### Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Death toll of Yemen's Aden airport blast rises to 26: AFP, December 30, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The attack on Aden airport meant to 'eliminate' new govt: Yemen's PM, Al Arabiya, January 2, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Yemen govt vows to bring stability after deadly attack, Ahram online, December 31, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Yemen's interior says ballistic missiles used to attack Aden airport, Arab news, January 14, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Yemeni military intercepts explosive-laden drone near Aden's presidential palace, Al Arabiya, December 30, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Iranian experts plotted attack on Aden airport: Yemeni PM, Arab news, December 31, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Arab Coalition Thwarts Houthi Attack on Aden's Presidential Palace, Asharq Al Awsat, December 30, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Iranian experts plotted attack on Aden airport: Yemeni PM, Arab news, December 31, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Iran condemns deadly attack in Yemen airport, the new Arab, January 1, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Second blast targets min

---

isters at Yemen presidential palace, the new Arab, December 30, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> UN envoy arrives in Aden a week after deadly airport blast, abc news, January 7, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Yemeni military intercepts explosive-laden drone near Aden's presidential palace, Al Arabiya, December 30, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Iranian experts plotted attack on Aden airport: Yemeni PM, Arab news, December 31, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Three Blasts Target Aden Airport after New Yemeni Gov't Lands, Asharq Al Awsat, December 30, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> UN envoy arrives in Aden a week after deadly airport blast, abc news, January 7, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Yemeni officials: Blast at Aden airport kills at least 16, wounds 60, the new Arab, December 30, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Yemen war: Deadly attack at Aden airport as new government arrives, BBC News, December 31, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Death toll of Yemen's Aden airport blast rises to 26: AFP, December 30, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Three Blasts Target Aden Airport after New Yemeni Gov't Lands, Asharq Al Awsat, December 30, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> The attack on Aden airport meant to 'eliminate' new govt: Yemen's PM, Al Arabiya, January 2, 2021.