

Yemen Redux: Reclaiming Stability in the Arabian Peninsula

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Brief Analysis

Although Washington's strategy in Yemen has largely unraveled, U.S. officials have several options for building on the current pan-Arab intervention, bolstering the Hadi government, and addressing the causes of instability in the country.

Ongoing developments in the Gulf have dramatically underscored the disintegration of the "Yemen Model" championed by President Obama last year, with members of a ten-nation Arab-led coalition continuing airstrikes against forces associated with the Houthis and former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, while a nervous Arab League voted this weekend to establish a regional counterterrorism force. The deteriorating security situation previously spurred the February closure of the U.S. embassy in Sana and the departure of all U.S. Special Operations instructors in the past two weeks. As plans continue for the possible introduction of Egyptian and Saudi troops as part of Operation Decisive Storm, a significant rethinking of U.S. strategy in Yemen is needed. Washington should adapt lessons learned from fighting the "Islamic State"/ISIS and pursue a holistic strategy to bolster President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, stabilize the military situation in southern Yemen, and push for negotiations between the warring factions.

WHY DID THE 'YEMEN MODEL' FALTER?

The relatively peaceful 2012 transition between Saleh's resignation and Hadi's election -- facilitated as part of an agreement brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) -- seemed to be a model for how diplomacy could promote peaceful change during the Arab Spring. The agreement granted Saleh and his family immunity from prosecution, initiated a National Dialogue Conference to discuss constitutional and government reforms, created a new national government with representatives from all political parties, and oversaw reform of the national military. While viewed at the time as a great success by regional leaders, the deal eventually began to show several

weaknesses, some of which had to do with overall U.S. strategy in Yemen as well as assumptions made during the agreement's adoption.

In many respects, U.S. counterterrorism strategy in Yemen was ill suited for bolstering Hadi during the political transition. Washington focused its modest efforts on training Yemeni special forces to track down members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) but did little to mentor the reforming army. Since the army was Saleh's central base of support, significant attention was needed to professionalize its personnel and prevent it from becoming a political actor once again. If U.S. and international forces had mentored the army, their presence might have mitigated its "collapse" against Houthi military advances -- an outcome caused by political factors, not lack of capabilities or poor leadership. They also would have served as an early warning mechanism for U.S. policymakers about the Saleh camp's efforts to turn the army against the Hadi government.

Indeed, Washington underestimated Saleh's strong intention to undermine the government and did not forcefully confront his political maneuvering. Since half of Hadi's cabinet was made up of figures from Saleh's General People's Congress Party, the former leader's political intrigues effectively hobbled the government.

Additionally, following the departure of U.S. ambassador Gerald Feierstein in October 2013, new ambassador Matthew Tueller was not dispatched to Sana until eight months later -- a crucial delay at a time when Hadi's government needed strong U.S. support. Earlier in 2013, John Brennan had left the White House to become CIA director after serving as President Obama's chief advisor on Yemen, among other duties -- another key change at a time when Yemen needed constant, experienced attention to navigate its political transition. While U.S. diplomatic support for the GCC agreement proved instrumental to the transition's initial successes, rotating out the ambassador who had led these efforts and waiting eight months to send his replacement communicated U.S. inattention and indecisiveness. The failure to effectively implement and follow through on agreements forged in the National Dialogue Conference further undermined Hadi's government.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

Without continuous attention, Yemen will become a source of instability and growing concern for America's Arab allies. The United States should therefore revise its approach to supporting the Yemeni government, moving beyond a narrowly focused counterterrorism effort and adopting a modified counterinsurgency strategy.

What this means in practice is that while targeted drone strikes against al-Qaeda operatives should continue, Washington needs a more holistic strategy that simultaneously addresses the most destabilizing armed elements (e.g., AQAP, Houthis, Saleh forces, and ISIS) as well as their bases of support and safe havens, whether tribal, geographical, or political. This requires a more concerted effort to increase the Yemeni state's reach and stability in the south and bolster Hadi's political position, all while rolling back Houthi/Saleh military gains and forestalling any AQAP advances. A temporary political safe haven should be created in the south for Hadi's government, and a series of steps should be taken to rescue the GCC transition process.

In the near term, the U.S. government should consider the following recommendations to stabilize Yemen:

- **Appoint a special envoy to coordinate U.S. strategy with the GCC countries** . Greater U.S. diplomatic and political leadership is needed to address the current crisis and resume transition efforts down the road.
- **Explore freezing the assets** of additional Houthi leaders as well as Saleh's family members and key supporters.
- **Support a review of the immunity agreement for Saleh and his family** . The Saleh camp has collaborated with the Houthis to seize power, so the United States should back any Yemeni or GCC decision to review the 2012 immunity deal.
- **Review the practical aspects of removing Saleh and his family from Yemen** . Washington should consider this move

as part of a strategy to reestablish stability, since his continued presence in the country will only create further problems.

- **Actively support Arab coalition efforts to secure Hadi's return to Aden.** The situation in the key southern city is fluid and chaotic, so urgent action is needed to prevent the Houthis from cementing control there. Hadi's return is absolutely vital to pushing back AQAP and the Houthis, so the United States should be prepared to play an active role in ensuring that it happens as soon as possible.

As the situation in the south stabilizes enough for Hadi to return, Washington should consider the following diplomatic and military options:

- **Reopen the closed U.S. consulate in Aden.** The facility was originally closed in 2009 due to security concerns, but U.S. officials should explore the possibility of reopening it as a gesture of support for the Hadi government. Washington should also consider posting the U.S. ambassador there as well. This could require a considerable security detail and a backup plan for quick extraction by U.S. forces 150 miles away in Djibouti.
- **Redirect all U.S. aid to Aden.** Once the security situation permits it, Washington should redirect all aid, budgetary support, and diplomatic efforts to Hadi's government in Aden, and encourage Saudi Arabia's announced decision to do the same.
- **Reintroduce U.S. Special Operations Forces.** Washington should review the possibility of redeploying special forces to train troops and tribal groups loyal to Hadi, whether in Yemen or at regional bases.
- **Create a "Yemen Hands" program to even out the disjointedness created by frequent rotations of U.S. personnel .** Bringing enduring stability to Yemen will take many years, and the constant rotation of U.S. personnel has created significant continuity problems. Creating a program along the lines of the "Afghanistan Hands" effort would allow select U.S. government personnel to focus on the problems, personalities, politics, and policies of Yemen for the long term.
- **Convene an academic symposium of leading experts on Yemen to provide advice to Washington .** A detailed understanding of the country's politics is required to build lasting stability, so academic research should be harnessed more effectively to inform policymakers.

Daniel Green is a Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute and a military veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan. ❖

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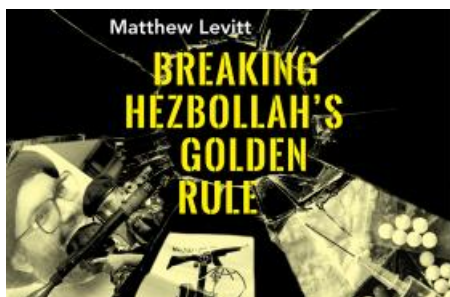
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