

Yemen's Saleh Strikes Back

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Brief Analysis

Washington needs to deepen its involvement in an increasingly unstable Yemen.

On September 23, President Ali Abdullah Saleh unexpectedly returned to Yemen after a 112-day convalescence in Saudi Arabia, where he fled following a June 3 assassination attempt that grievously injured him. He now faces an increasingly violent political situation at home: opposition groups and the government are locked in a military and political standoff in the capital, and fighting has expanded in the south between regime security forces and members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Given the balance of forces and Saleh's apparent intention to remain in power, the deterioration is likely to continue absent effective international intervention.

Saleh's Actions Speak Louder than Words

In a televised speech on September 25, Saleh reiterated his support for a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative regarding peaceful political transition in Yemen through early presidential, parliamentary, and local elections. Toward that end, he expressed support for Vice President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi and called again for "dialogue and signing the deal and its implementation mechanism to take the country out of this dangerous impasse." Although he mentioned his interest in securing the opposition's backing for that process, he also said his government would move forward and "implement the initiative" regardless of their position. In addition, he warned Yemenis against using violence to gain political power, arguing that they must use "ballot boxes" instead.

Saleh's speech promising a potential political solution to Yemen's enduring crisis stood in sharp contrast to the violence on the capital's streets and elsewhere in the country. Indeed, violence intensified in Sana following his return, with loyalists fighting pitched battles against forces aligned with Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (who has been protecting protestors in Change Square) and Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar (who leads members of the Hashid tribal confederation in the Hasaba neighborhood). Both men hail from the same tribal confederation as Saleh but are

unrelated.

Although reports vary, at least 80 to 100 protestors have apparently been killed since Saleh's return, along with more than a dozen soldiers from both sides. Early reports indicate that Saleh loyalists likely instigated the hostilities, although other sources suggest that protestors challenged the president's troops. In either case, the level of violence is similar to that of March 18, when at least fifty-two protestors were killed and hundreds more injured -- a massacre that prompted military defections and became known as a turning point in the protests. The latest clashes may be another turning point.

Furthermore, tribal forces opposed to Saleh attacked a military base north of Sana housing the 63rd Brigade of the Republican Guard, a force loyal to the president and led by his son Ahmed Ali. (See Saleh family tree at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/mapImages/4df7cc30a6ab3.pdf>.) The brigade's local commanding officer, Gen. Abdullah al-Kulaibi, was killed in the fighting, and the attackers captured more than a dozen prisoners.

Meanwhile, the country's Islamist movement has continued to expand its influence. AQAP has begun to wage an assassination campaign in Aden, targeting security officials in the former capital of South Yemen in likely preparation for a western offensive. The latest evidence of this strategy was the September 27 failed suicide attack against Defense Minister Muhammad Nasser Ahmed as he visited government troops in the south. AQAP has also registered several victories in the southern governorate of Abyan, reportedly taking the coastal city of Shaqra on August 17, the provincial capital Zinjibar on May 29, and the town of Jaar on March 27.

The Transition Challenge

Although President Saleh bears most of the blame, the escalating violence by both sides will make a peaceful transition more difficult. Even if an agreement were reached allowing for a transfer of power, the political and logistical challenges of successfully implementing elections would be significant.

If positive change is to occur in Yemen, the political process must be viewed as fair, honest, and incorruptible. Moreover, comprehensive reform plans must be drafted with a focus on translating electoral results into programs for government action. Saleh's supporters may want the political situation to return to normal rather than face reform, however, so any comprehensive solution will need to address corruption, service delivery, government expenditures, distribution issues with respect to patronage, and so forth. In addition, a more robust international presence will be required to ensure transparency, facilitating an electoral process that all parties regard as fair.

At the same time, the security situation in southern Yemen will need to be addressed in some fashion in order to assure residents there that their votes will be counted. Along with defeating AQAP's political program in the south, this may entail procedures allowing internally displaced people to vote outside their home village or district. The process will also need to de-escalate the fighting and develop confidence-building measures.

U.S. Options

Washington can take a variety of immediate steps to strengthen its understanding of what is happening in Yemen and help the country halt its slide toward increasing instability:

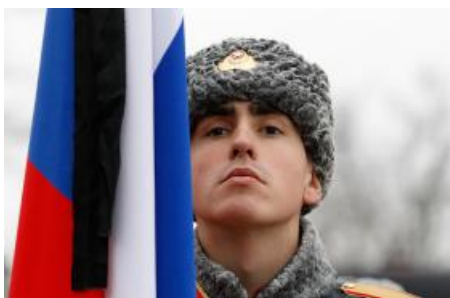
- *Establish a special envoy.* To demonstrate its commitment to the Yemeni people and convey its seriousness of purpose, Washington should consider appointing a special envoy for Yemen. This individual would work with regional partners such as Saudi Arabia and with political factions outside the government, including tribal representatives in the countryside. Appointing an envoy with the express purpose of ensuring a speedy transition would reinforce the U.S. view that Saleh must transfer power peacefully and quickly.
- *Develop a robust assistance package for a new government.* Yemen's next government will have to adopt a

program of political and economic reform to meet the demands of opposition groups and defeat AQAP. To do so, they will need technical, political, administrative, and economic advice as much as financial assistance. Washington should consider expanding its diplomatic and development staff within Yemen to undertake this initiative. It should also solicit funding from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, reminding them that they would feel the spillover effects of a civil war or failed state in Yemen.

- *Forward-deploy U.S. development and good-governance initiatives.* Washington should also evaluate the practical aspects of decentralizing its governance and development programs in Yemen, moving some of them from the capital to the countryside in partnership with provincial governors or other officials. This approach would bolster local governance, mitigate some of the underlying grievances that AQAP exploits to increase its support, and improve Washington's understanding of the tribal dynamics outside Sana. For example, U.S. agencies could deploy small teams of development officials to the countryside, much like the provincial reconstruction and district support teams in Afghanistan and Iraq. Notwithstanding security concerns, Washington should also consider establishing consulates in Aden, Taizz, and eastern Yemen to facilitate reconstruction and development activities and community engagement. In addition, it should explore the possibility of partnering with international representatives in joint consulates.
- *Create a "Yemen Hands" program.* The State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the U.S. military should extend the tours of select personnel at the embassy in Sana in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the local situation. Washington should also develop a "Yemen Hands" initiative similar to the "Afghan Hands" program, wherein U.S. personnel work in the country for a number of years. This approach would help to even out the continuity problems that result from constant personnel rotations.

Daniel Green is a Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Yemen, al-Qaeda, counterinsurgency, and stability operations. ♦

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