

The Persistence of President Saleh

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Brief Analysis

U.S. and Saudi efforts to pressure injured Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh to agree to a peaceful transfer of power have been unsuccessful. To counter al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, a new approach is required.

On August 7, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh left a Saudi hospital where he had been recuperating from wounds suffered in a June 3 attack on the presidential palace in Sana. He is now staying at a Saudi government guesthouse to continue convalescing. Since the attack, which grievously injured him and as well as several other Yemeni officials, government and opposition military forces have been locked in a standoff in Yemen's capital. Meanwhile, government and tribal forces in several southern provinces are fighting Ansar al-Sharia (Supporters of Islamic law), a group affiliated with AQAP.

With Saleh out of the country, Vice President Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi has been overseeing the government even though the president's son -- Ahmed Ali, who is also head of the Republican Guard -- has moved into the presidential palace. With no plausible plan to break the government/opposition stalemate, officials are continuing their efforts to convince the elder Saleh to accept a peaceful transition and not return to Yemen. As the president's health improves, Sana will need to chart a political path toward a viable and legitimate government that can partner with the United States to defeat AQAP.

A Stagnating Revolution

Protests against Saleh's rule began shortly after Tunisians ousted their own long-serving leader in January. Initial demonstrations were led by youths calling for the removal of Saleh's entire family from power. They were soon joined by members of the political opposition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), who did not call for Saleh's resignation at first, demanding only that he eschew running for reelection in 2013 or elevating his son to the presidency.

Saleh's initial concessions -- agreeing not to run in 2013, to press for a constitutional amendment allowing him to seek another term, or to elevate his son -- did little to curb the protests. Following the February 11 resignation of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, the demonstrations took on added urgency as Yemenis began to view their country as next in line for leadership change. Violence increased, and the mounting death toll prompted a deep split in the governing coalition as well as mass defections to the opposition.

Following a March 18 massacre of protestors by forces affiliated with Saleh that killed 52 people, Saleh's problems only worsened. On March 21, Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar announced that he would support and protect protestors seeking to remove the president from power. This signaled a significant split within the military, which had previously supported Saleh. In late May, political divisions intensified when Saleh's forces attacked the home of Sadeq al-Ahmar, the paramount sheik of the Hashid tribal confederation and one of the president's main political opponents.

Despite numerous military and political defections, Saleh continues to retain power, in part because his opponents lack a constitutional means of removing him without his consent. Some opponents have cited Article 116 of the constitution, which stipulates that if the president is incapable of carrying out his duties for sixty days, then executive power must be transferred to the vice president, followed by a new presidential election within sixty days. Yet Saleh's supporters insist that he has been meeting with dignitaries in Saudi Arabia and making executive decisions.

Despite these factors, the chances of the conflict devolving into a general civil war are present but unlikely. Saleh's decision to reinforce his military around Ahmar's stronghold suggests that he considers his opponent's challenge manageable.

Al-Qaeda Fills the Vacuum

With Yemeni military forces deployed to Sana for either regime protection or regime change, AQAP has exploited the resultant security vacuum in the countryside. On May 29, for example, more than 200 alleged AQAP members overran the town of Zinjibar, capital of Abyan province in the south. This followed a similar operation in nearby Jaar, where members reportedly seized a munitions factory on March 27. The past few months have also seen numerous smaller-scale killings, thefts, and assassinations by AQAP.

Big Questions Remain

The central questions at present are whether Saleh will return to Yemen and, if so, the nature of his intentions. He has long expressed pride at having unified the county and governing it in a relatively democratic fashion, at least by regional standards. And Gerald Feierstein, the U.S. ambassador to Yemen, recently described him as "a stubborn person [who] cannot be put in a corner." Having survived the palace attack, Saleh seems unwilling to give his opponents the satisfaction of chasing him out of the country. Moreover, his family and political and tribal supporters retain a strong presence in Yemen and will likely play an important role in whatever outcome emerges. Indeed, Saleh's advisors continue to state that he will return, and absent any new developments forcing his hand, he has a great deal of time to recuperate and plan his next moves.

U.S. Options

Although U.S. policy calls for removing Saleh peacefully, Yemen's ambiguous political climate is not presenting many potential solutions. Yet Washington can take certain steps to improve the climate of transition, deescalate military conflicts, dampen AQAP's resurgence, and lay the groundwork for a stable Yemen that can partner with the United States on counterterrorism issues.

Encourage parliamentary elections. Any peaceful, democratic transition will require presidential and parliamentary

elections that are transparent, fair, and legitimate. Moreover, holding the previously delayed legislative elections sooner rather than later could help ease the fighting and refocus the protestors' energies, giving both Saleh's supporters and the opposition a measure of political influence. In his February 2 address to parliament, Saleh announced that the parliamentary elections originally slated for April 27 would be rescheduled to allow for better compilation of voter records, which was a key opposition demand at the time. To get past the ongoing stalemate, Yemen could hold these elections now, while Saleh is still recovering in Saudi Arabia. This would allow the country to set aside the issue of his return, however briefly, and move reform and political solutions to center stage.

Appoint a special envoy. Any political resolution in Yemen will require additional U.S. diplomatic personnel. Washington should consider appointing a special envoy to help Ambassador Feierstein reach out more aggressively to regional partners, tribal representatives in Yemen's countryside, and political factions in Sana, Taizz, and Aden.

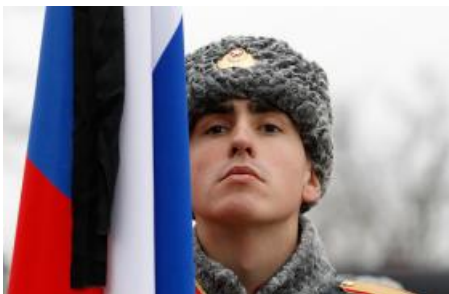
Expand military training and the number of tribal liaisons. Washington should propose a more robust training program for Yemen's security services, deploying personnel who can function as an informal network of advisors and mediators between the principal combatants. In particular, U.S. trainers should be embedded with Yemeni units in Sana and deployed to the provinces to provide combat advice against AQAP and bridge political differences between rival factions.

Restructure development and good-governance initiatives. Washington should evaluate the practical aspects of decentralizing its governance and development programs, moving some of them from the capital to the countryside, in partnership with provincial governors or other officials. This approach would bolster local governance and mitigate some of the underlying grievances that AQAP exploits to increase its support. It would also improve Washington's understanding of the tribal dynamics outside Sana.

Much depends on President Saleh. Despite being written off by many analysts after his injury, his recovery appears strong.

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

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