Yemen's Crisis: Options for U.S. Policy

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Brief Analysis

Yemen is experiencing a relative lull following the dramatic events of June 3-4, when government forces attacked the homes of senior opposition leaders and President Ali Saleh was seriously wounded in a palace bombing. Although skirmishes continue throughout the country, all sides are saving their strength for the major outbreak of violence that could occur if Saleh attempts to return from his convalescence in Saudi Arabia. For U.S. policymakers, many fundamental questions remain unanswered, including who will lead Yemen out of turmoil, whether the United States has an interest in any particular outcome, and what Washington can do to affect the result.

Military and Political Balance of Power

At present, the Saleh government continues to hold the levers of power within the densely populated triangle formed by the capital, the Red Sea port of Hodeida, and the southern port of Aden. The regime is now an undisguised military junta, relying on the control of key security organs by Saleh's sons, nephews, and in-laws. Indeed, the president's clan -- the Afaash branch of the Sanhan tribe, part of the Hashid tribal confederation -- holds all of the key security portfolios and commands in central and southern Yemen:

- Based in the presidential palace, Saleh's eldest son Ahmed Ali commands the Republican Guard, a reinforced division of around 20,000 troops spread across central and southern Yemen.
- Saleh's nephews Yahya and Ammar command the fifty-thousand-strong Central Security Forces (CSF) and the small but important National Security Bureau, respectively. These internal security and intelligence organs received U.S. equipment and training in the past.
- Another nephew, Muhammad Saleh, heads the U.S.-trained Hard Missions Unit of the Yemeni Special Operations Forces.
- Saleh loyalists command the army's Central Division and four subordinate mechanized brigades (the 27th, 29th, 35th, and 201st) that make up the bulk of the regime's intact forces.
- Saleh also controls the air force and has used its ground-attack planes and helicopters against southern separatists regularly since February.

The army's other two main components -- the smaller Northern and Eastern Divisions -- are loyal to Saleh's rivals in the Sanhan tribe's Qadhi clan. The Northern commander, Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, is a distant relative who openly announced his opposition to Saleh on March 21. From 2004 until recently, he led a significant portion of the army in six grueling campaigns against the Houthi rebels. He is allied with Eastern Division commander Gen. Muhammad Ali Mohsen, though it is unclear how much of eastern Yemen the latter's forces actually control.

Interestingly, al-Ahmar's forces are continuing to fight Houthi rebels in the north, sometimes alongside Saleh-controlled forces. He also commands military units active in Sana, notably at the Ministry of Defense, the current residence of acting president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, Saleh's vice president. So far, these units have largely stayed out of the fighting, except when attacked by Saleh loyalists.

For its part, the main coalition of opposition groups, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), has demonstrated growing command of the Yemeni street, raising demonstrations every week in Sana that number in the tens of thousands. On June 20, protestors began to call for Ahmed Ali to step down from government service in order to forestall any potential succession bid.

The JMP is a collaboration between the Islah Party and the Yemeni Socialist Party. Islah comprises Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist activists, plus a strong tribal component led by ten brothers of the Hashid confederation, including leader Sadeq al-Ahmar and business magnate Hamid al-Ahmar. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar has backed the brothers since his defection from Saleh's camp in March. As mentioned previously, the president's forces attacked the homes of a number of al-Ahmar brothers in late May and early June, including Hamid's.

Peripheral Actors

A number of other actors are playing smaller but potentially crucial roles in Yemen's military and political power struggle:

- *Houthi rebels.* In the north, Houthi clans continue to mount their insurgency against government forces. Both Saleh and General al-Ahmar have actively repressed the clans, and the Islah Party's Salafist elements view the Houthis as heretics given their adherence to the Shiite sect of Zaydism.
- *Southern secessionists.* The Southern Mobility Movement has mounted an escalating campaign of protests and militant strikes, whether to pressure the regime into correcting inequities in the north-south power balance or to win southern Yemen a degree of autonomy or even full independence. The movement has some ties to the JMP, with supporters hailing from both the southern-based Yemeni Socialist Party and Islah.
- *Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).* This movement is currently al-Qaeda's most active and successful regional franchise, with a track record of ambitious attacks against Western interests in Yemen and Saudi Arabia as well as plots against the United States itself. AQAP has ties to intelligence elements within Saleh's regime and to General al-Ahmar's military camp (the general was a senior recruiter for "Arab Afghans" sent to fight the Soviets in the 1980s). It is also linked to elements within Islah, notably Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Zindani, who was named a U.S. Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2004. AQAP appears to be gradually infiltrating its preachers and fighters into areas taken over by opposition forces in the south and west.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Although reporting on AQAP's takeover of southern cities appears to be exaggerated, Yemen's long-term descent into chaos would clearly suit al-Qaeda's purposes. In that scenario, the country would be the ideal terrorist safe haven: a collapsed state and tribal hinterland adjacent to some of the world's busiest shipping lanes, connected by long porous borders to the energy-rich Persian Gulf states, and close to a string of ungoverned spaces on Europe's southern periphery, stretching from Somalia to Mali. Long-term stability in Yemen is therefore critical to the security

of the United States and its allies.

The near-term alternative -- watching as the state collapses, then attempting to wage a counterterrorism campaign amid warring factions -- is a recipe for failure. Drone strikes might seem like a way to suppress AQAP opportunism, but further militarization of U.S. policy in Yemen could carry hidden costs. For example, even successful strikes would risk fostering a new generation of jihadists in Yemen (Princeton scholar Gregory Johnsen has written eloquently on that danger). AQAP has failed to recruit large numbers of Yemenis in no small part because the country is not yet a bona fide war zone like Afghanistan or Iraq. The recent acceleration of U.S. airstrikes and collateral damage incidents has already bolstered al-Qaeda's claims that Yemenis can now legitimately sign up to fight a jihad against America in their own country. Too narrow a focus on "hard" counterterrorism could play directly into AQAP's hands at this crucial time.

Unfortunately, finding "soft" alternatives is difficult -- nearly all of Yemen's current factions would be problematic partners for the United States for one reason or another. In the longer term, U.S. policy should emphasize the need for a broad-based government that includes members of the Saleh regime but does not re-empower it or allow the president himself to return. Once a new government emerges, Yemeni leaders will no doubt seek to replicate the formula in which the United States provides military aid in return for Sana's counterterrorism collaboration. This approach is justifiable to some extent, but Washington should not allow it to once again become a substitute for long-term efforts to strengthen Yemen's institutions and address economic and social problems.

In short, the changing of the guard in Yemeni politics is an opportunity to break the mold. Sana's partners -- principally the United States and Saudi Arabia -- should work together to give the country more accountable, more transparent, and less corrupt governance, with a focus on long-term development rather than short-term enrichment.

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