Yemen in Transition: The Dangers of Continuing Instability and al-Qaeda

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Brief Analysis

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The wounding of Yemeni president Ali Saleh during a June 3 attack on his Sana palace compound will likely lead to regime change in his troubled country. Although reports from Riyadh, where he is being treated for his injuries, suggest he wants to return home soon, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf Arab countries, the United States, and Britain all want him to give up power. From Washington's perspective, Yemen has emerged as al-Qaeda central and a concern that rivals Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Saleh has essentially been pushed out by members of his tribal confederation. Acting president Abdu Rabu Mansour Hadi, Saleh's vice-president, has only a small power base, though the main coalition of opposition groups, the Joint Meeting Parties, has recognized his status. The JMP has also called for early elections, and Mansour Hadi is reportedly consulting with a wide variety of actors to gauge his next steps. For the time being, a fragile ceasefire has emerged in Sana, where the demonstrators' street power and weapons are balanced by the firepower of the (U.S.-trained) military and security units controlled by Saleh's relatives.

Whoever emerges as new leader is likely to spend his initial months, even years, maneuvering to solidify his power. This does not bode well for U.S.-Yemeni counterterrorism cooperation. Like Saleh, a weak president might see the local al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) as both an enemy and an ally. Another concern is Anwar al-Awlaki, the U.S.-Yemeni dual national whose radical sermons inspired the November 2009 Fort Hood shooter and the December 2009 attempted airline bomber in Detroit. In addition to al-Qaeda, Washington is worried about the security of the Bab al-Mandab Strait between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, a piracy-afflicted waterway through which 3 million barrels of oil pass daily.

Going forward, Saudi Arabia will be a crucial diplomatic player. For years, Riyadh has selectively backed Yemeni groups, often with large donations of cash. Such involvement has often been ham-fisted: in 1994, for example, Riyadh backed a rebellion in the former South Yemen, an episode that saw Mansour Hadi, then a military commander, defect to the north. And last year, Saudi military units were given a bloody nose in confrontations with rebels from Yemen's Houthi tribe in the northwest border region.

Even under the best circumstances, the new Yemen would look rather like the old one: despite its violent and unstable history, the country has hung together in various forms for some time, though Saleh's own authority often did not extend far outside of Sana. Yet in the absence of political reform and reconciliation, an apocalyptic scenario could emerge under which Yemen collapses into four parts: Sana and its immediate environs; a Houthi-controlled pocket in the northwestern mountains; the former South Yemen around the port city of Aden; and an al-Qaeda region in the center, perhaps with access to the coast linking it to the already-failed state of Somalia. In light of such scenarios, successfully managing a post-Saleh transition is a vital U.S. interest.

Simon Henderson is a Baker fellow and director of the ***Gulf and Energy Policy Program (/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)*** *at The Washington Institute. Daniel Green is a Soref fellow at the Institute.* ❖

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