Fighting al-Qaeda: The Role of Yemen's President Saleh

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Brief Analysis

Yemen's reemergence in the headlines as a crucial player in the fight against al-Qaeda raises questions about Washington's next steps. What sort of relationship will the Obama administration have with President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the longtime leader of what could be the world's next failed state? Saleh spoke with President Barack Obama by telephone on December 17, 2009, and later met in Sana with General David Petreaus, the head of U.S. Central Command, on January 2. But the lessons of Saleh's relationship with the Bush administration suggest that close ties can be matched by sharp policy differences.

Saleh's Bloody Background

Apart from Muammar Qadhafi of Libya, Saleh is the Middle East's longest-serving leader. Now a field marshal by rank, he first came to prominence in 1977 as a thirty-one-year-old major during political turmoil in what was then North Yemen (which united with South Yemen in 1990.) The country's military leader at the time, Ibrahim al-Hamdi, was assassinated, as was his brother, by unidentified gunmen who riddled their bodies with bullets. An Arab newspaper described it at the time as a well-planned coup, naming Saleh as a conspirator along with his mentor, Lt. Col. Ahmed al-Ghashmi, the deputy commander-in-chief of the army who became North Yemen's new leader. Al-Ghashmi himself survived an assassination attempt five days after taking power but was subsequently killed in June 1978 when the briefcase of a special envoy from South Yemen exploded in his office. A month later, Saleh was voted into office by the quasi-parliament as president and commander-in-chief; he survived yet another assassination attempt only months later.

Saleh showed himself to be skilled in political maneuvering by winning army support for his appointment. According to the 1986 Library of Congress handbook The Yemens: Country Studies, he had "no obvious qualification for the presidency and [was] neither highly educated nor widely experienced in government." His greatest accomplishment, other than merely surviving, was arguably the union of former communist South Yemen with North Yemen. This development worried neighboring Saudi Arabia, whose indigenous population remains less than that of Yemen. Riyadh's relations with Sana have been a key variable over the years. Prior to the merger, the kingdom's default position was to support the north. In 1994, however, the Saudis backed South Yemeni dissidents in an attempt to secede. From Riyadh's perspective, the fighting -- in which Saleh used sympathetic jihadist fighters, Scud missiles, and more conventional forces to crush the rebels -- was partly a consequence of Sana's support for Saddam Hussein after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. At the time, Yemen had been a member of the UN Security Council and had cast the only vote against the resolution permitting the use of force against Iraq.

Policy Crises with Washington

Saleh's support for Saddam was no surprise; he had openly admired the Iraqi leader and was known in the Arab media as "Little Saddam." But the UN vote outraged the United States. "That will be the most expensive 'no' vote you will ever cast," a U.S. diplomat told Yemen's UN ambassador in front of an open radio microphone. Three days later, Washington cut its entire $70 million aid package to the country.

U.S.-Yemeni relations gradually recovered, but the 2000 al-Qaeda attack on the USS Cole, at anchor in Aden harbor, was another blow. Tensions were exacerbated by poor Yemeni cooperation with FBI investigators and, later, by apparent government-sanctioned "escapes" of detained al-Qaeda suspects, including key plotter Jamal al-Badawi on two separate occasions (2003 and 2006). A further irritant was Sana's 2002 purchase of Scud missiles from North Korea. A Spanish naval vessel operating with a U.S. Navy-led task force intercepted the shipment, and the incident was depicted as a blow against the activities of a rogue state. But the sale did not breach international law, and Saleh insisted, against U.S. wishes, that the missiles be delivered.

Despite these difficulties, the Bush administration put great efforts into developing relations with Saleh, who visited the United States four times: in 2001 (after the September 11 attacks), in 2004 (for a G-8 summit emphasizing democratic change in the Middle East), in 2005, and again in 2007. Although Yemen's antics over the al-Badawi escapes and other issues angered U.S. officials, the administration judged that there was a standing opportunity to leverage counterterrorism policy during Oval Office meetings.

Domestic Politics

Saleh's 2007 visit also served as an opportunity for President Bush to congratulate Saleh on his success in the previous year's presidential election. He had won convincingly in polls that, while condemned by the losing opposition candidates, were judged mostly fair by foreign observers. Freedom House now rates Yemen as "partly free." In contrast, during the 1999 election, the main opposition candidate had not been permitted to run, and Saleh's only opponent on the ballot had announced that he was himself would be voting for the sitting leader. Although Saleh's style remains dictatorial, he acknowledges the limits of his authority by relying on patronage. His years of apparent success in buying off threats are now being tested on several fronts, including a rebellion by members of the Houthi clan in the north, continuing resentment of Sana's control in the south, and the presence of an estimated several thousand al-Qaeda fighters who have found sanctuary and sympathy among Yemen's religiously conservative tribes in the lawless hinterland. In Saleh's view, al-Qaeda probably rates as the least of these threats.

Meanwhile, a rapidly expanding population is stretching Sana's limited resources and administrative capabilities to the breaking point. Until recently, Yemen's modest oil reserves provided 90 percent of export earnings and 75 percent of total government revenue. But production is now a third lower than its 2001 peak, and increasing domestic use has reduced the amount available for export. One hope is natural gas, which Yemen has just begun to export. But the 200-mile pipeline to a liquefaction plant

on the coast could be vulnerable to terrorist attack or sabotage by local tribes with a grievance against Sana Water shortages are also becoming more common, a consequence of poor infrastructure and large-scale cultivation of qat, a thirsty shrub with narcotic leaves. Indeed, the widespread use of qat across all strata of Yemeni society -- from the bottom to the very top -- is viewed as a significant limiting factor in the country's development.

Saleh ultimately maintains his position through control of the army, where his relatives hold top commands. His eldest son, Ahmed, is head of the Republican Guard and the special forces. Although seen as a possible successor, he is not deemed ready to assume power at the moment, nor need he be: Saleh is only sixty-three. One potential worry is that Gen. Ali Mohsen -- a key Saleh ally who has commanded the forces fighting the Houthi rebels -- is thought to oppose Ahmed taking any increased political role. Nevertheless, Saleh was boosted by Saudi-orchestrated support for him at the December 2009 Gulf Cooperation Council summit.

U.S. Policy

President Saleh is erratic and, reportedly, sensitive to criticism. But the Obama administration has no alternative but to continue engaging him. Failure to do so would risk terrible consequences. Yemeni officials deny that their country is becoming a failed state but are quick to use the possibility as a means of attracting Washington's attention. Admitting to the presence of thousands of al-Qaeda fighters was an additional gambit, now strengthened by apparent Yemeni links to the attempted December 25 bombing of a Northwest Airlines flight to Detroit. General Petreaus's January 2 meeting was the most recent of what are regular high-level U.S. visits. Whether Washington can influence Saleh sufficiently without offering him another visit to the White House remains to be seen. And even that gesture would not rule out the possibility of further crises in the relationship.

Simon Henderson, Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy program **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)** at the Washington Institute, is the author of the 2009 Policy Focus After King Abdullah: Succession in Saudi Arabia **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=315)** . ❖

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