

Yemeni President Saleh Comes to Washington

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Nov 7, 2005

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Brief Analysis

The November 10 meeting at the White House between U.S. president George W. Bush and Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh will be the third time the two men have met since the September 11 terror attacks on the United States. Yemen is an oft-forgotten close U.S. ally, arguably as crucial to the success of the war on terror as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or Egypt. The south Arabian country, with its rugged, desert landscape, remains a sanctuary for al-Qaeda operatives. With seacoasts along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Yemen dominates the Bab el-Mandab shipping chokepoint, the route by which oil from the Persian Gulf reaches the Suez Canal and hence the European market. (A French supertanker was badly damaged in an al-Qaeda attack off the Yemeni coast in 2002.)

President Saleh is one of the Arab world's longest-ruling leaders. A soldier by background, Saleh came to power in 1978, chosen by a constitutional assembly after the previous leader was assassinated. In 1990, he led what was then North Yemen into unification with South Yemen, merging a traditionalist society with a then avowedly Marxist one. The strains told in 1994 when a secessionist revolt broke out, backed by Saudi Arabia, in southern Yemen; the rebellion was overwhelmed by Saleh's forces.

U.S.-Yemeni Relations

Yemen's present close relationship with Washington came after setbacks. In January 1990, Saleh visited Washington, where President George H.W. Bush saluted him as a "pillar of stability." Yet in November 1990, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Yemen, then a member of the UN Security Council, voted against military intervention to force Iraq to withdraw. That vote prompted Washington to cut off U.S. aid. And in 2000, when al-Qaeda terrorists attacked USS Cole in the Yemeni harbor of Aden, cooperation in the subsequent investigation was reportedly abrasive.

The last time Bush and Saleh met was the G-8 summit at Sea Island, Georgia, last year, when the Yemeni leader was invited to show support for U.S. policy on democratic change in the Middle East. Talks between the two men this week may advance little beyond Bush's thanks for Saleh's present cooperation and the Yemeni president's affirmation that it will continue. Officials from the two sides, though, have a more challenging agenda. Yemeni Islamists are among foreign jihadists fighting U.S. forces in Iraq. Months of domestic unrest in northern Yemen have followed the killing of a dissident cleric in 2004; more than one thousand people are reported dead. In July 2005,

Yemeni police killed thirty-six people in widespread clashes during demonstrations protesting against International Monetary Fund (IMF) advised cuts in fuel subsidies. Yemeni relations with Saudi Arabia, seldom smooth, have worsened after a Yemeni exile there announced he was forming an opposition group. And, across the Red Sea, relations with Eritrea, itself embroiled in tension with Ethiopia, are often awkward because of Eritrean claims of fishing right around the Yemeni Hanish Islands.

Saleh's Governing Style

Saleh's style of government is uncomfortable for Washington's focus on reform and democracy. The Yemeni leader's longevity in office is a tribute to his handling of the traditional strings of power -- the tribes and the army -- rather than democratic popularity. He was elected with 96 percent of the vote in direct elections in 1999, when the main opposition candidate was not allowed to run. In fact, Saleh's only opponent on the ballot announced that he was himself voting for Saleh. The Yemeni leader is very sensitive to criticism. Last month, remarks by U.S. ambassador Thomas Krajeski caused a storm when he reportedly commented on police beating journalists and putting them on trial. His statement, "Democratic progress in Yemen has stalled," upset the government in Sanaa, especially since, in Arabic, stalled was translated as stopped.

Democratic reform does not seem to be Saleh's priority. Little has been done in terms of democratic progress, and much of the non-Islamist opposition is operating from abroad. Earlier this year, the president pledged that he would not run for another mandate in the presidential elections of 2006, a mandate that would have seen the start of a fourth decade in power. Before the 1999 presidential elections, Saleh made a similar pledge, then changed his mind. Skeptics claim that this is again mere rhetoric without any real intention to relinquish power.

The southern non-Islamist opposition is becoming increasingly active and does not find room for legitimate opposition in the current political framework. It is important that Saleh resolves southern-northern tensions through democratic and peaceful means so as not to threaten the stability of the country. Engaging the southern opposition could prove useful in countering radical Islamists. The south, generally more liberal without necessarily being un-Islamic, could be a moderate and positive force in support of a democratic process.

Another issue for Washington is the ambiguity that exists between the Yemeni regime and radical Islam. Religious radicalism has increased during the Saleh era. His policies of cooptation could prove to be hazardous. The Yemeni regime encouraged Islamism in the late 1970s and early 1980s to counter the socialist threat of that era. Later, in the middle 1990s, Saleh won over Islamists during his clashes with Marxists in the south. Islamists are part of the Yemeni political landscape. Yemeni nationals were second only to Saudi Arabians in the numbers of Arab fighters who resisted the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Saleh does not want his alliance with the West against terrorism to discredit him at home, so he leaves radical Islamists a fair margin of maneuver. This serves short-term political interests and delays much needed democratic reforms. In short, the Saleh regime seems to be both combating and nurturing radical Islam.

What Next for Yemen-U.S. Relations?

The challenge for this week's meeting is to achieve a result with longer-term implications than merely continuing and improving Yemeni cooperation with the United States in the war on terror. On paper, Yemen is an obvious candidate for political reform, perhaps with some federal structure to allow a more satisfactory role for people in the south. Economic reform is also necessary: high oil prices have given a welcome but perhaps temporary boost to government revenues, and Yemen's oil reserves are small by the region's standards. Official corruption is also a problem and a political irritant. President Saleh's style often veers toward brinkmanship, as indicated by his declaration that he will not stand again in presidential elections due in 2006. Will he change his mind? Probably. When? Who knows. The Yemeni president's gambit, though, allows Washington to offer to help Yemen frame a post-

Saleh national structure.

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