

# WebMemo



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## Yemen: U.S. Policy Implications of President Saleh's Resignation Offer

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Yemen's embattled President Ali Abdullah Saleh has conditionally agreed to step down from power 30 days after a tentative agreement is signed with a coalition of opposition parties. But this face-saving political deal, brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council, has already been rejected by tens of thousands of protesters who adamantly demand an end to Saleh's 32-year rule.

If Saleh steps down, none of his likely successors is likely to cooperate as closely with the United States on counter-terrorism issues. But if he continues to cling to power, his increasingly weak and isolated regime will be in no position to contribute effectively to containing and defeating the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), a major terrorist threat to the United States. The U.S. has a major stake in averting a civil war that would enable AQAP to improve its position within remote sanctuaries in Yemen's tribal badlands.

**Crumbling State Power.** Saleh is a ruthless political survivor who has dominated the tumultuous politics of the Arab world's poorest country for more than three decades. Although he cannily exploited factional and tribal cleavages to maintain power, his ruling coalition has suffered important defections in the face of two months of protests in which the regime's violent response has claimed more than 130 lives. The accelerating erosion of Saleh's narrow base of support has left the unpopular president unable to sustain himself in power without harshly repressing the swelling opposition.

Saleh's faltering regime, which has increasingly lost control over events outside the capital of Sanaa, has mobilized thousands of supporters to demonstrate in favor of the government. But the defections of key military officers—including Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Yemen's top military leader—has severely undermined the regime's long-term staying power. General Mohsen has deployed his forces around key facilities in Sanaa to reach an uneasy standoff with Saleh's loyalists, and he looms large as a key leader in the loose opposition coalition that has coalesced to drive Saleh from power.

Saleh had already offered to step down at the end of the year after new parliamentary elections are held, but the opposition insisted that he do so immediately. Opposition leaders acquiesced to a proposed political deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council that calls for Saleh to resign and relinquish power to his vice president in exchange for a guarantee of immunity for Saleh and his sons. But this proposed deal has been loudly rejected by protesters who distrust Saleh's promises and want to see him punished for his repressive rule.

**Prevent Yemen from Becoming a Failed State.** Washington's highest priority in Yemen is to contain

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and eventually defeat AQAP, which has emerged as the most urgent threat to homeland security since the al-Qaeda high command was forced to hunker down in Pakistan's remote tribal areas. AQAP's Anwar al-Aulaqi, an American-born Yemeni cleric, has emerged as a key al-Qaeda leader. He is believed to have inspired Major Nidal Hasan, who perpetrated the 2009 Fort Hood shootings, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the failed suicide bomber who sought to destroy an airliner bound for Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. Aulaqi is also suspected of playing a role in the November 2010 AQAP plot to dispatch parcel bombs to the U.S. in cargo planes.

The U.S. entered an awkward alliance of convenience with Saleh to ratchet up pressure on AQAP. Although preventing AQAP from carving out a secure sanctuary in Yemen is Washington's most urgent priority, Saleh's regime was always more concerned with the threats posed by the seven-year-old Houthi rebellion in the north and the simmering secessionist movement in southern Yemen. Yemen's weak government will be even less inclined and less able to assist U.S. efforts to fight AQAP now that Saleh is fighting for his political life.

To help stabilize Yemen and maintain pressure on AQAP, the Obama Administration should:

- **Push for a peaceful transition of power as soon as possible.** The longer Yemen remains convulsed by growing political violence, the stronger AQAP is likely to become. Washington should publicly press Saleh to step down to defuse rising tensions and enable the formation of another government. Continued political paralysis would rapidly increase the risk that Yemen will become a failed state in which AQAP could flourish.
- **Maintain close contacts with Yemen's military leaders.** The backbone of any successor government is likely to be comprised of military or former military leaders. General Mohsen is likely to emerge as the enforcer of any new regime, and he should be approached discreetly to determine whether he has modified his troubling past support for Islamist extremists.
- **Engage the opposition.** American diplomats and intelligence officers should discreetly contact and sound out key leaders of political groups

and tribes within the loose opposition coalition to ascertain which ones would be potential allies against AQAP and help them to become integral parts of the next government.

- **Coordinate policy with Saudi Arabia.** Riyadh has a strategic interest in Yemeni stability and defeating AQAP, which narrowly missed assassinating the Saudi prince who leads counterterrorism efforts in a suicide bombing in August 2009. Saudi Arabia wields the strongest foreign influence in Yemen by disbursing subsidies to tribal leaders and financial aid to the government.
- **Prevent Iran from fishing in troubled waters.** There is a growing danger that the chronic Houthi rebellion could become a full-blown proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Houthi tribesmen are Zaidi Shiites who do not share Iran's brand of Shiism, but they remain open to Iranian support in their conflict with the predominantly Sunni Yemeni army and Saudi Arabia. The best solution would be to broker a political settlement that would permanently end the Houthi rebellion. But in the meantime, the U.S. should cooperate with the Saudi and Yemeni governments to contain Iranian influence and intercept any arms shipments.

**Time for a Change.** President Saleh has been a half-hearted ally against AQAP, which he perceived to be much less of a threat to his power than a southern secessionist movement or the Houthi rebellion in northern Yemen. Now that he is on the ropes, Saleh will be even less effective as an ally against terrorism and increasingly problematic as a political partner. If he stubbornly ignores the widespread popular demands for his resignation, there is a growing chance that Yemen will succumb to anarchy, to the great benefit of AQAP.

Washington should work to prevent that from happening by encouraging a peaceful transfer of political power to a government that enjoys enough popular support to halt Yemen's slide into chaos.

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