



Yemen Beyond Saleh

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Problems and Prospects for the U.S. and its Allies

Executive Summary

1. Yemen is a vital security interest to the U.S. and its allies. Before the Arab Spring it was on the verge of collapse, facing the challenges of a moribund economy, secessionist groups, northern rebels, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and influential military and tribal forces. After the Arab Spring, in which over 140 protesters have been killed during anti-government protests, President Saleh's grip on power is even weaker.
2. Despite his current stalling, President Saleh will inevitably resign as leader of Yemen. His government has been decimated by a series of resignations, military loyalties are sharply divided and tribal support has dissipated. The U.S. and its allies must encourage Saleh to accept the Gulf Cooperation Council proposal, leading to the creation of a new national unity government.
3. This new government will be a loose mix of Islamists, socialists, Nasserites and tribesmen, which will need to cultivate the loyalty of the military and the influential General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. While this government will not instinctively be pro-Western, the U.S. and its allies do have room for engagement. In all likelihood, those Islamists that are strengthened by Saleh's departure are likely to be despised by AQAP and weakened by the broadness of the coalition. In preparation for Yemen post-Saleh, the U.S. and its allies must begin to cultivate relations with lower level figures in the current regime and influential figures in opposition groups.
4. The U.S. should revive the aid package that had been approved for Saleh. This will only become viable when the Yemen government itself has stabilised and is capable of distributing aid somewhat effectively. The financial rewards in the aid package should be: incentivised to encourage the new government to commit itself to tackling the root causes behind the domestic problems in Yemen; dependent upon the coalition government being a genuine reflection of the plurality of voices in the Yemeni political system; and conditional on a pledge to allow the U.S. a freer hand to deal with AQAP.
5. The U.S. needs to step up its campaign against AQAP. It especially needs to stress to the post-Saleh government the importance of restarting missile and aircraft strikes and using armed drones, currently virtually halted due to a lack of usable intelligence. The CIA should foster relations with influential tribes and provide financial incentives in return for tribes declining assistance to AQAP.

‘Yemen in collapse could lead to a litany of chaos – no water, no energy, no food, civil strife, al Qaeda flourishing, increasing radicalisation, and a regional and international threat both to world energy supplies and to many nations’ security.’

Alan Duncan, Minister of State for International Development, November 2010

INTRODUCTION

Yemen is now a vital security interest to the U.S. and its allies. Before the Arab Spring it was on the verge of collapse – a dire economic and humanitarian situation being exacerbated by al-Qaeda (AQ) using it as a base to launch a wave of terrorist operations. After the Arab Spring, in which over 140 protesters have been killed during anti-Saleh protests, government control over the country is even weaker and AQ even stronger. A political resolution is required immediately if steps are going to be taken to boost the economy, strengthen law and order and respond to the AQ threat.

Hundreds of thousands have taken to the street to protest Saleh’s rule, yet the president remains determined not to give in to their demands. Last month it appeared as if a successful agreement had been brokered between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Saleh’s party. The agreement specified that a coalition government would be formed and Saleh would transfer power to his vice president, who would then resign within 30 days. Fresh presidential elections would follow two months later. However, Saleh is currently stalling – saying he will only sign the accord as chairman of the ruling General People’s Congress and not in his capacity as president. The deal is on the verge of collapse.

Policymakers have justifiable concerns as to what will follow Saleh. Yemen is notoriously hard to govern. While formally a republic, the government has generally functioned on a patronage system, in which tribal leaders and sheikhs pledge loyalty to the government in return for protection and, usually, financial incentives. The central government has little control over the country outside of Sana’a, the capital. It has been in consistent conflict with Northern Houthi rebels from the minority Shia Zaidi sect (although a ceasefire was called in February 2010). The government has also faced military challenge from the secessionist South and is increasingly regarded as a safe-haven for AQ, whose Yemen branch (al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula – AQAP) has been responsible for a series of attempted terrorist attacks in the West and in Yemen itself.

Realistically, Saleh’s departure is inevitable. His government has been decimated by a series of resignations, military loyalties are sharply divided and tribal support has also dissipated. Having ruled the nation for three decades, Saleh’s authoritarian rule has meant Yemen has essentially been run as a ‘family fiefdom’.¹ His removal would give Yemen the opportunity to work towards a more democratic and representative future.

Yet prior to his violent crackdown in response to the Arab Spring, Saleh was regarded by the West as an ally against al-Qaeda. It was received wisdom that only he could provide the strength of leadership to keep a country blighted by factionalism unified; and only he that would be a reliable ally in allowing the U.S. freedom to operate against AQAP in Yemen. Once Saleh resigns, where will the power lie and how will it affect the U.S. and its allies?

Yemen is notoriously hard to govern. While formally a republic, the government has generally functioned on a patronage system, in which tribal leaders and sheikhs pledge loyalty to the government in return for protection and, usually, financial incentives.

Yemen: at a glance

The Republic of Yemen was created in 1990 following unification between the North and the socialist South. President Saleh, who came to power after a military coup in North Yemen (the Yemen Arab Republic) in 1978, became president of the newly formed Republic of Yemen. The secessionist South attempted to break away again during the 1994 civil war, but were defeated after three months of fighting.

Yemen is primarily an Arab Muslim nation, comprised of Shaf'i (Sunni) and Zaydi (Shia) sects. There are also small, but increasing, numbers of Salafists (Sunni), as well as very small communities of Christians, Hindus and Jews.

Key stats:

- ▶ Yemen has an estimated population of 24,133,492 and the highest birth rate in the region.
- ▶ The population is extremely young. The average age is just 18.1 years and over 75% of the country was born after Saleh came to power in 1978.
- ▶ The unemployment rate is 35%.
- ▶ At just 63.74 years, Yemen has the 173rd lowest life expectancy rate in the world.
- ▶ The literacy rate is an estimated 50%.
- ▶ 40% of Yemenis live on less than \$2 a day.

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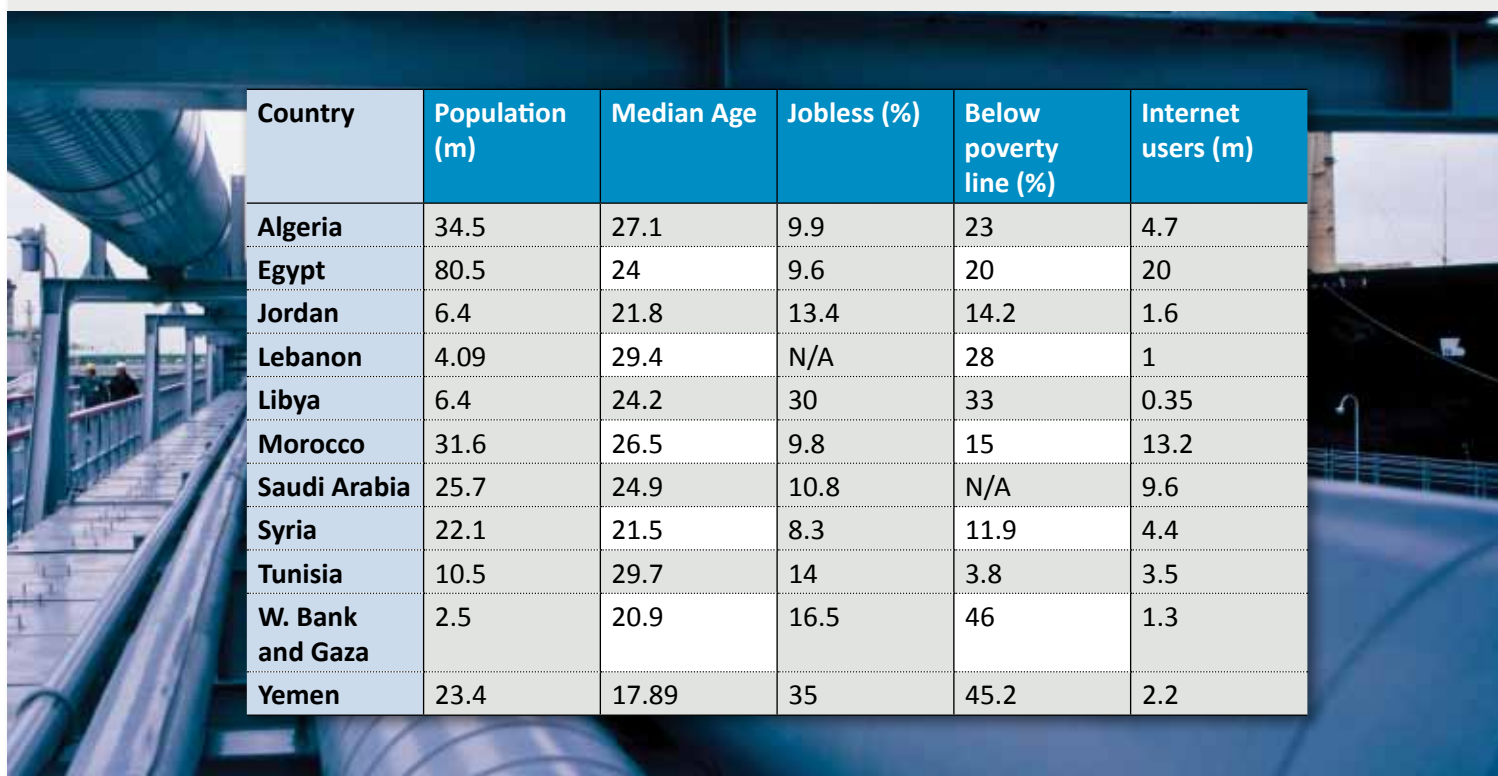
The economy

Yemen is the most impoverished nation in the Middle East. The country has a high population growth rate, an extreme water shortage and suffers from a lack of external investment and malnutrition.

Yemen's largest export partners are China, Thailand and India, and its main exports crude oil, coffee, fish and liquefied natural gas (the export of which is the result of the 2006 economic reform program designed to bolster non-oil sectors of the economy). While Yemen's oil wealth is incomparable to its Saudi Arabian neighbour, oil revenue had previously been used to provide basic public services – and its decline has contributed to the trenchant anti-government sentiment.

Key stats:

- ▶ Yemen is the 16th largest seller of liquefied natural gas – its 490bn cubic meters of gas constituting 0.3% of the global reserves.
- ▶ Petroleum accounts for approximately a quarter of Yemen's GDP and 70% of government revenue. It is the 32nd largest oil exporter. Its oil reserves constitute 0.2% of the global reserves, mostly produced in the south.
- ▶ Unemployment rates vary wildly – from the 15% (claimed by the government) to 35% (assessed by the CIA) to 49% and rising (claimed by some economists). This has been exacerbated by stagnation in the construction sector, with investors wary of funding projects in the midst of the anti-government protests.
- ▶ Inflation stands at between 15-18%.



Country	Population (m)	Median Age	Jobless (%)	Below poverty line (%)	Internet users (m)
Algeria	34.5	27.1	9.9	23	4.7
Egypt	80.5	24	9.6	20	20
Jordan	6.4	21.8	13.4	14.2	1.6
Lebanon	4.09	29.4	N/A	28	1
Libya	6.4	24.2	30	33	0.35
Morocco	31.6	26.5	9.8	15	13.2
Saudi Arabia	25.7	24.9	10.8	N/A	9.6
Syria	22.1	21.5	8.3	11.9	4.4
Tunisia	10.5	29.7	14	3.8	3.5
W. Bank and Gaza	2.5	20.9	16.5	46	1.3
Yemen	23.4	17.89	35	45.2	2.2

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WHO ARE THE OPPOSITION?

THE YOUTH MOVEMENT

Sporadic student and civil society protests demanding government reform began on 15 January 2011. By 27 January, tens of thousands of youth activists and anti-government protesters had taken to the streets. Within weeks, this escalated to hundreds of thousands demonstrating against Saleh. While the movement has been peaceful in nature, the government has responded with violence, resulting in the deaths of over 140.

The protesters' concerns were broadly similar to other participants in the Arab Spring:

- ▶ extreme poverty
- ▶ lack of economic reform
- ▶ government corruption
- ▶ frustration with a lack of political opportunity

Many of the protesters are believed to be students, lawyers and university professors from the Yemeni middle class. Thousands of female protesters have also participated – especially in defiance to Saleh's claim that men and women free-mixing at the protests was a violation of Islamic law. By March 24, the Youth Movement unified under an umbrella movement and published a list of demands.² However, while the opposition is significant in size, they do not share a common vision for Yemen beyond Saleh's removal.

JOINT MEETING PARTIES (JMP)

The JMP (aka 'The Common Front') are the most organised of the anti-government opposition.

A coalition formed in 2002, the JMP is comprised of a variety of political parties. The largest is the Islah party, which holds 20% of the seats in the Yemen legislature. It was founded by Abdullah al-Ahmar, the former leader

of the Hashid tribal confederation, and now believed to be funded by his son, Hamid.³ Islah is a loose affiliation of northern Islamists (including Salafists), tribal elements and members of the al-Ahmar family. It also contains four other minor parties – the southern-based Yemeni Socialist Party, the northern-based Hizb al-Haq, the Nasserite Unionist Party and the Popular Forces Union party.

The JMP have been a largely ineffective opposition beset by internal divisions – partly due to Salafists who have been reluctant to engage with the government and bemoaned the political role played by women in Yemen.⁴ One especially problematic Salafist figure within Islah is Abdul Majid al-Zindani – who in 2004 was listed as a 'specially designated global terrorist' by both the United Nations and the US Treasury, which described al-Zindani as 'a loyalist to Usama bin Laden and supporter of al-Qaeda'.⁵

The accusations against him include:

- ▶ support for designated terrorists and terrorist organizations
- ▶ a long history of working with Osama bin Laden, notably serving as one of his spiritual leaders
- ▶ influence and support for terrorist causes, including actively recruiting for AQ training camps

Al-Zindani is also known to have run a university at which Anwar al-Awlaki – a key AQAP commander – lectured,⁶ and founded a charity of which al-Awlaki was Vice-President.⁷

AL-AHMAR FAMILY

Abdullah al-Ahmar – a longtime ally of Saleh – was head of North Yemen's Hashid confederation until his death in 2007. He was considered the second most powerful person in the country, being elected the first speaker of the House of Representatives (Yemen's

lower house of parliament) in 1993, and re-appointed in 1997, 2003 and 2007.

Al-Ahmar had long been considered the main channel for Saudi Arabian funds and influence in Yemen, often distributing funds to tribes. The family are still able to wield significant political influence through al-Ahmar's 10 sons, who do not appear to share the same level of loyalty to Saleh as their father did. Hamid – regarded as a potential successor to Saleh – accused the president of treason in 2009, and in response to the recent domestic unrest, Hussein resigned from the General People's Congress and Himyar resigned as deputy speaker of parliament.

HOUTHİ REBELS

The northern Houthi group has its roots in the Believing Youth political and paramilitary group established in the mid-1990s by Hussein Badr al Din al Houthi. Following Saleh's public alliance with the U.S. after 9/11, Hussein al-Houthi instigated anti-U.S. and anti-government rallies. He was killed by the Yemeni security service in September 2004, leading to the formation of a group named in his honour. The group calls for autonomy for the Zaydi Shiite population from the Yemeni state. Their grievances consist of concern that their brand of Islam (Zaydi Shia) is threatened by Saudi-fused Wahhabism, that the central government is too closely aligned to the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, and that North Yemen is being economically marginalised.⁸

The Houthi movement has fought a civil war against the central government at various times since 2004. In August 2009, the government launched a major military offensive against the group following al-Houthi takeover of hospitals, mosques, schools, military installations, and roads in Sa'ada and Amran provinces. Following the most



recent ceasefire of 2010, Saleh said that the Houthis could form a political party and contest elections if they wished. So far, however, the Houthi involvement in Yemeni politics has been negligible. In response to the 2011 protests against Saleh, a Houthi statement declared that they had 'not fired a single bullet in the last several weeks. They have taken the street in Saadain in their thousands like the rest of Yemen.'⁹

There has been consistent speculation¹⁰ that the Houthi rebels are Iranian-backed, an accusation repeated by both Yemen and Saudi Arabia.¹¹ Saleh has also claimed the Houthi rebels are supported by Hizbullah.¹² While Iran has condemned Saudi and Yemeni operations against al-Houthi rebels, there is little concrete evidence that either they or their Hizbullah proxy are actively arming the rebels. U.S. government analysis regards Iranian influence in Yemen as 'limited to informal religious ties between Yemeni and Iranian scholars and negligible Iranian investment in the energy and development sectors'.¹³ While Iran will welcome anti-Saudi sentiment in northern Yemen, it is likely that Sana'a and Riyadh are taking advantage of U.S. fears about increasing Iranian influence in the region to justify cracking down on domestic groups that challenge either the legitimacy of their rule or the expansion of Wahhabi ideology.

SOUTHERN SECESSIONISTS

The Southern secessionist movement dates from 1994, when the South unsuccessfully tried to secede from the North. The movement retains popular support in the South, yet its leaders have temporarily dropped their demands for independence in order to support the broader movement calling for Saleh's overthrow. However, their grievances extend far beyond Saleh's rule and are likely to survive his removal.

Southern secessionist concerns are largely economic – marked by accusations that the government has not done enough to help develop the Southern economy and that the North has been enriched by illegally occupying Southern land.¹⁴ Therefore, popular support for the movement can be partly tempered by resolving the moribund state of the economy.

As with all the domestic movements that threaten him, Saleh has accused the Southern separatists of being aided by outside forces – in this case, specifically Qatar, Libya and the U.K.¹⁵

THE MILITARY

The most significant figure within the Yemeni military is General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. Commander of the north-east region and the 1st Armoured Division, Ali Mohsen was described by the former U.S. ambassador to Yemen as Saleh's 'iron fist'.¹⁶ He

controls the northern governorates of Sa'ada, Hodeidah, Hajja, Amran, and Mahwit, with estimates that he manages more than half of all military resources and assets.¹⁷

Ali Mohsen has publicly backed the anti-government protests. However, if there is a military hijacking of the anti-government movement – a fear that has been raised among protesters in Yemen – Ali Mohsen stands to gain, as his reputation makes him well placed to be a potential kingmaker.¹⁸ The prospect of a more influential Ali Mohsen is clearly a concern of the U.S. government. A 2005 cable stated that 'Ali Mohsen's questionable dealings with terrorists and extremists... would make his [ascension] unwelcome to the U.S. He is known to have Salafi leanings and to support a more radical Islamic political agenda than Saleh.'¹⁹

The military has traditionally been close to the civilian government in Sana'a – which makes the steady stream of defections against Saleh all the more significant. The military has been split by the protests, with some remaining loyal to Saleh but an increasing amount supporting the demonstrators. The government has resorted to arresting officers in a bid to stem the tide of defections.²⁰

TRIBAL ELEMENTS

Tribal politics are crucial in Yemen. With much of the country outside

of central government control, the tribes offer a basic – though often corrupt – form of local government. The most powerful tribes are the Hashid (Saleh's tribe) and the Bakil, who are extremely influential in the North.

Saleh has become reliant on tribal approval to maintain power – approval that has often been bought with money gained by selling oil.

He has been willing to hand out influence, money, jobs and other state resources to the tribes in return for their loyalty. Following recent anti-government protests, Saleh tried to rally tribal support, by dispensing large cash donations and other gifts.²¹ However, Saleh has now lost the crucial support of key tribes – even those with long-standing rivalries and feuds – a significant blow given Saleh's considerable investment in

winning their support to ensure he stayed in power.

AQAP's interaction with the tribes is complex. While AQAP has been largely unsuccessful in recruiting from them, its fighters have on occasion received shelter. Yet significantly, the tribes have largely rejected AQ ideology and Sharia law in preference for their more malleable tribal law.

NATIONAL SECURITY IMPERATIVES

Prior to the outbreak of anti-government protests, the U.S. was on the brink of announcing what has been described as a 'record assistance package' to Saleh. This package has now been shelved.²² The first installment – worth an estimated \$1 billion over several years – was due to have been paid in February. This aid was regarded as an attempt to get relations back on track, and reward for Saleh's defying domestic opinion to let U.S. Special Forces operate against AQAP militants inside Yemen. Up to \$200m would have been provided in counterterrorism (CT) support in the next fiscal year (up from \$155m the previous year and only \$4.6m in 2006) with a similar amount to development programmes. Saleh had claimed that these development packages were crucial domestically to show the tangible benefits of co-operation with the U.S.²³

The U.S. government was initially reluctant to call for Saleh's resignation, largely due to the lip-service he paid to fighting AQAP. It had invested time, money and political capital in cultivating his loyalty, and in return Saleh allowed them to carry out missile and aircraft strikes and permitted U.S. Special Forces to help his domestic security service carry out CT missions and training. This pro-Saleh attitude was mirrored in Riyadh, which has spent billions in Yemen in pursuit of stability and a reliable partner against AQ.²⁴ In March 2009, Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Nayef stated Saleh's

departure 'would leave a vacuum that would further weaken Yemen'.²⁵

While there is good cause to be nervous about the type of regime that might replace Saleh, his efforts to defeat AQAP have been half-hearted and ineffective. Even when Saleh's grip on power was more secure, U.S. attempts to bolster Yemen's CT capacity was hamstrung by governmental infighting.²⁶ Evidence also suggests that Saleh is not prosecuting the war against AQAP with anything like the seriousness that his U.S. backers would hope. U.S. officials have stated that they do not believe Saleh regarded AQAP as a key priority, preferring to focus on exploiting the tribal patronage system in a bid to ensure their loyalty and disrupt separatist domestic groups.²⁷ As late as 2009, at a meeting with the then CIA deputy director Stephen Kappes, Saleh attempted to place the threat from AQAP as 'on the same level' as Southern secessionists and al-Houthi rebels. He quickly revised this opinion and conceded AQAP was the main threat, a comment that a U.S. State Department cable said 'was almost certainly taken with his U.S.G. interlocutors in mind'.²⁸

More troubling are U.S. fears that Saleh actively embraced radical Islamist elements in a bid to disrupt other domestic groups.²⁹ In early 2006, 23 convicted AQ terrorists escaped from prison, which U.S. diplomats regarded as a state-sanctioned release. The escaped prisoners included operatives

who assisted in the attack on the USS Cole in 2000 and Nasir al-Wahishi, current head of AQAP. State Department officials concluded that '[Political Security Office] insiders must have been involved at least as facilitators of the escape'.³⁰ A U.S. cable in May 2009 further highlighted just how ineffective Saleh's campaign against AQAP was, stating that 'AQAP leadership is aware [that] even should [Yemeni] security forces continue their counter-terror campaign, such actions are unlikely to significantly affect operational planning and/or execution'.³¹ In spring 2009, Saleh even offered AQAP a ceasefire – an offer which was quickly rejected.

Furthermore, U.S. funds that should have been going directly to target AQAP has long been used by Saleh to crush other domestic opposition.³² A December 2009 cable from the U.S. ambassador to Yemen reported that Yemeni CT units had been 'derailed from its principal mission: to combat AQAP'.³³ The U.S. Embassy says that the Yemen Special Operations Forces and the Counter-Terrorism Unit platoon were deployed 'after Yemen's regular forces struggled against the Houthis' unconventional tactics'.³⁴ There have been similar reports that Yemen's CT forces are being used to disrupt anti-Saleh protests,³⁵ prompting a public rebuke from Defense Secretary Gates.³⁶ U.S. officials believe that he has again deflected army resources towards shoring up his own domestic position.

CHALLENGES FOR A NEW GOVERNMENT

While Saleh has proven to be a generally unsatisfactory ally, there is justifiable concern about what kind of government will follow him. Both the U.S. and its allies and the new Yemeni coalition government will face a variety of fresh challenges.

POLITICAL

Firstly, it is crucial that a new Yemeni government is even formed. Saudi Arabia fears tribal and regional fragmentation following Saleh's departure. This is a worst case scenario that can only strengthen AQAP.

The U.S. and its allies must encourage the immediate implementation of the GCC approved plan. Despite Saleh's current stalling, this remains the likeliest option for the future. The unity government created under the GCC proposals will be an extremely loose gathering of Islamists, socialists, Nasserites and tribesmen. This coalition will need to cultivate the backing of the military and the influential Ali Mohsen. There will still be some who object to this arrangement – the Houthi rebels are inimically opposed to Saleh and any GCC compromise with his approval. Given their lack of Houthi political engagement thus far, it is highly unlikely that they would be co-opted as part of any national government. Fissures in the military will also need to be fixed. An effective army presence is crucial to the pursuit of AQAP.

The U.S. ambassador is correctly already engaging with figures in the

Yemen opposition parties.³⁷ In the pre-election period, the U.S. and its allies should also foster contact with the Youth Movement in a bid to encourage their involvement in the democratic process. So far the protesters' demands have been limited to demanding the collapse of the current regime. If they do not want their protests to be hijacked by establishment forces, they need to become politically organised. In the current political context, the Youth Movement do not realistically look



like having a significant role in any new government, and it is unlikely that the coalition will look favourably on continued protests once Saleh has gone.

The new coalition will be broad, with shifting allegiances, and will have to carefully cultivate relations with both the tribes and the military. It is unlikely that any new regime will be instinctively sympathetic to the U.S. and its allies. Saleh has played upon fears of an Islamist takeover in an attempt to retain international support, saying that the 'Arab world, including the Yemeni people, are terrified of the possibility that the

Islamists will take control.³⁸ While this essentially amounts to scare-mongering from an authoritarian leader attempting to keep hold of power, some Islamist elements will admittedly be empowered by Saleh's removal – specifically the likes of al-Zindani.

Yet in all likelihood, the Islamists will be weakened by the broadness of the coalition. Furthermore, Middle Eastern governments already friendly to the U.S. and its allies generally contain members with varying levels of Islamist sympathy. The dilemma facing policymakers is to determine the extent that the softer Islamist elements within the Islah, for example, can be engaged, and whether the prospect of power – and the forming of a national coalition government – will moderate the extremist Salafi elements. The softer Islamist elements within the Islah may be viewed as heretics by AQAP anyway –

much as the Muslim Brotherhood is in Egypt. This should be exploited by the U.S. and its allies, who will need to bring the more pragmatic elements of the Islah onside against AQAP.

The tribes will also be crucial. While policymakers should be encouraged that Yemeni tribes have been generally resistant to AQ ideology, this cannot be taken for granted. A recent BBC documentary quoted a tribesman observing that 'I know in my village some people who are from al-Qaeda, but I swear to you that they do not have ideological motivation. They are joining al-Qaeda because of poverty.'³⁹ If tribesmen joining AQ is indeed mainly dependent on

poverty, then clearly bolstering the Yemeni economy is vital to removing sympathy for AQ within the tribes.

The new government will have to carefully cultivate the loyalty of tribal elements, who often switch allegiances.⁴⁰ This reputation for fickleness presents a potential opportunity for policymakers, as the tribes are not so ideological that they cannot be brought on side if given the right incentives, including financial.

ECONOMIC

The new government needs to kick-start the economy, which will be given even higher priority than halting AQAP terrorism. Both oil and gas production is in decline. Since the beginning of the protests there has been an increasing lack of foodstuffs and cooking fuel – and with civilians stockpiling their reserves, the price of the available stock has sharply risen. The value of the rial has collapsed by approximately 20%.⁴¹ Military spending constitutes 6.6% of GDP, the 7th highest in the world and an estimated four times the investment in the decimated public services.⁴² Inflation – standing between 15-18% – needs to be brought under control.

A new Yemen coalition government will also desperately require aid. Therefore the Gulf countries – especially Saudi Arabia – must continue their aid programmes. Oman has invested in Yemeni infrastructure, which the U.S. should continue to encourage. The U.S. should also revive the aid package that had been approved for Saleh. Basic infrastructure and vital institutions need investment, and the food shortage and widespread malnutrition needs to be addressed. However, this aid package will only become viable when the Yemen government itself has stabilised and is capable of distributing aid somewhat

effectively. The U.S. should offer its administrative expertise on this matter.

The financial rewards in the aid package should also be incentivised to encourage the new government to commit itself to tackling the root causes behind so many of the problems in Yemen. For example – if the government manages to successfully reduce the unemployment rate by a specific percentage over a five year period, increase literacy rates, reduce the amount of those under the poverty line or reduce inflation, then this could trigger further aid. If no progress is being made, aid would be reduced. The aid should also be dependent upon the coalition government being a genuine

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reflection of the plurality of voices in the Yemeni political system. Again, if new departments were overly represented with extreme Salafists, this would be cause for the U.S. to reduce its aid. This aid must also be conditional on a pledge to allow the U.S. a freer hand to deal with AQAP.

The economic situation is directly linked to the security situation. When the country is stable, industries will be in a position to engage in normal operations and begin investment; by stopping AQAP from launching attacks against gas and oil facilities and reclaiming oil-rich areas controlled by the group, production can increase. While a new coalition government may not be a naturally ally, there is at least a lot of leverage that the U.S.

and its allies can bring to bear.

AL-QAEDA

Even before the anti-government protests, Sana’a was struggling to contain the threat from AQAP. As early as 1999, the government backed down from confronting the group – AQ operative Waleed bin Attash was released by Yemeni authorities after bin Laden said he would not attack them if they did not interfere or try to disrupt his operations.⁴³ Attash was subsequently released, and is now awaiting trial at Guantanamo Bay for his role in 9/11. Yemen has also been used as a staging ground for a AQ terrorist attack prior to 9/11. The suicide bombing of the USS Cole in 2000 took place while it was stationed in Aden.

With its weak central government and lack of civil institutions, Yemen has become a virtual safe haven for AQ. Defense Secretary Robert Gates called AQAP ‘perhaps the most aggressive branch of al Qaeda’.⁴⁴ John Brennan, Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, has labeled AQAP as ‘the most operationally active node of the al-Qaida network’,⁴⁵ and

Prime Minister David Cameron has described it as the ‘cancer’ of Yemen.⁴⁶ According to U.S. estimates, there are over 300 AQ operatives currently located in Yemen,⁴⁷ and France had also estimated that ‘several hundred’ AQ affiliated terrorists currently operate there.⁴⁸

AQAP officially formed in January 2009, following a merger between the Yemen and Saudi branches of AQ. Perhaps the most well known AQ commander in Yemen is the U.S. born preacher Anwar al-Awlaki – linked to a variety of recent attempted terrorism attacks in the U.S. and U.K. and extremely popular amongst jihadists in the West. Yet the most senior member AQAP commander is

Naser Al-Wahishi, a Yemeni national and former aide to Osama bin Laden. Al-Wahishi had previously been detained in Yemen, but escaped from prison in 2006.

In the year of its formation, AQAP militants launched suicide missions against a diverse range of targets, including South Korean tourists and official convoys, Yemeni forces and the Saudi Deputy Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef. On 25th December 2009, AQAP attempted its most high profile attack on the West to date, assigning Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab to destroy a passenger aircraft heading to Detroit using a bomb sewn into his underwear. The bomb failed to detonate and Abdulmutallab is currently awaiting trial in the U.S.

Throughout late 2009 and early 2010, AQAP was the target of a U.S. bombing and covert CIA campaign. For a year, beginning May 2010 – when U.S. missiles mistakenly killed one of Saleh’s envoys – the bombing stopped. Saleh’s annoyance at this incident meant that he was not as willing to share intelligence, and the lack of precise information against actionable targets halted U.S. missile attacks. However, in a bid to gain greater personal U.S. support against the Arab Spring protesters, Saleh once again began to share important intelligence information – so much so the U.S. launched a drone strike in Yemen against al-Awlaki on 5 May 2011. While it narrowly missed its primary target, it killed two brothers known to shelter AQ fighters.⁴⁹ It remains to be seen whether Saleh will continue to be as forthcoming on intelligence sharing.

Even without military strikes, the U.S. continued to target AQAP in other ways – it now has approximately 75 Special Forces trainers and support personnel in Yemen, as well as an unspecified number of CIA

operatives. This has had some success – it has been Yemen’s own CT forces that conducted recent operations against suspected AQAP militants.⁵⁰ However, the decline in U.S. military pressure encouraged AQAP to step up its operations in 2010 – attacking British embassy targets and launching waves of attacks against domestic targets. AQAP also retained its focus on attacks against the West – most significantly the cargo bomb plot of October 2010, in which several parcel-bombs containing the explosive pentaerythritol tetranitrate were discovered on passenger and cargo planes.⁵¹

Having survived previous U.S. attacks, the AQAP of 2011 is a better organised outfit. Its emails are now

Defense Secretary Gates has warned that if ‘[Saleh’s] government collapses or is replaced by one that is dramatically more weak, then I think we’ll face some additional challenges out of Yemen.’ If the Saleh family steps down – as demanded by the Youth Movement –U.S. CT efforts would essentially be reliant on untried deputies.

highly encrypted, code names have been adopted, information is passed by hand via couriers and cell phones have been replaced by walkie-talkies, which are harder for US drones to monitor.⁵² AQAP has taken advantage of political unrest in Yemen, and is now essentially operating throughout the country. It is deeply entrenched in the mountainous, oil-rich Shabwa province, where government soldiers and security forces have abandoned approximately 50% of their compounds.⁵³ They are also in control of Jaar, a town in the neighbouring Abyan province, and launch regular attacks against government forces there.⁵⁴ The weak central government and increasingly fractured state only increases the likelihood of further safe havens developing.

To address the AQAP threat, a speedy resolution to the uncertain political situation is vital. If the country is not stabilized quickly, streams of AQ fighters and commanders may make their way to Yemen. Yemeni officials say that the ‘political turmoil’ of the Arab Spring has meant that a British-backed scheme to open CT centers in provinces with a strong AQAP presence had to be shelved. Counterterrorism operations involving U.S. Special Operation forces, aerial surveillance via Predator aircraft and undercover CIA operations against AQAP have also essentially ceased.⁵⁵ As long as this situation continues, the U.S. and its allies are more vulnerable to terrorist attack.

Problematically, the U.S. have essentially tied most their CT efforts in Yemen to the Saleh family (Saleh’s son and three nephews are in charge of four of Yemen’s CT agencies, which are trained and equipped by the U.S.).⁵⁶ U.S. authorities are rightly concerned whether Saleh’s successor would allow CIA operatives to operate freely in

the country and Predator drones to patrol the area. Defense Secretary Gates has warned that if ‘[Saleh’s] government collapses or is replaced by one that is dramatically more weak, then I think we’ll face some additional challenges out of Yemen.’⁵⁷ If the Saleh family steps down – as demanded by the Youth Movement –U.S. CT efforts would essentially be reliant on untried deputies. The U.S. should do everything in its power to immediately foster relations with the lower ranking officials who could potentially take over these roles.

Militarily, it is concerning that intelligence on the ground in Yemen has become so unsatisfactory that the U.S. does not feel comfortable carrying out missile attacks on

actionable targets. The only hard power the U.S. can bring to bear in disrupting terrorist planning is missile and drone strikes – which can only be resumed once the U.S. procures better intelligence on the ground. Encouragingly, the CIA, in conjunction with Saudi Arabia, has been heavily focussed on intelligence collection in recent months.⁵⁸ It should aggressively court individuals on the fringes of Islamist and tribal movements to become potential informants.

In a hugely impoverished country racked with shifting loyalties, buying cooperation is an attainable goal.

A new Yemeni government may be tempted to believe it can cut a peace deal with AQAP, giving it freedom to operate in return for AQAP calling off its domestic attacks. This scenario remains unlikely. One of the lessons of 9/11 is that the U.S. government will not tolerate nations harbouring terrorist movements and allowing them a base to plot against the

U.S. and its allies. Furthermore, any government that allows AQAP bombers to cross the border into Saudi Arabia will be treated unsympathetically by Riyadh. U.S. co-operation with Saudi Arabia will remain vital – the Saudis have no interest in seeing a nation on their border splinter further. It is unlikely that even the most anti-American Yemeni government will also choose to be openly hostile to its powerful northern neighbour.



NEXT STEPS

The Saleh situation is a familiar dilemma for the West. Support an unsatisfactory authoritarian ally or embrace the uncertain outcome of a revolution?

As a matter of principle, the U.S. must move beyond the longstanding practice of relying on Middle Eastern strongmen who they hope can 'unite' hugely disparate elements within the country. In Saleh's case, the U.S.' decision was made somewhat easier by his incompetence and duplicity. In the final analysis, Saleh has made empty promises but has not done enough to stop the resurgence of AQAP. The U.S. has now calculated that, even if Saleh survives the domestic unrest, he will be so undermined that his ability to prosecute any war against the group would be significantly weakened. As a result, they are willing to roll the dice that his successor will be at least be no worse than Saleh, and may in the best case scenario be more democratic. It is important not to be defeatist over Yemen. It may face an uncertain and unstable period – yet Saleh's departure should be seen as an opportunity to make the country more democratic and secure.

Priorities for the U.S. and its allies should now be as follows:

- ▶ Encourage Saleh to accept the GCC proposal, and ensure he is offered immunity as an incentive to step down.
- ▶ Cultivate relations with lower level figures in the current Saleh regime, as they are likely to become more senior following his eventual resignation.
- ▶ Foster contact with influential figures in the JMP and other opposition groups, stressing desire for future co-operation.
- ▶ Make contact with the Youth Movement – and encourage the formation of a political party and manifesto.
- ▶ Encourage the CIA to cultivate relations with influential tribes; and if necessary provide financial incentives in return for declining shelter and assistance to AQAP.
- ▶ Revive the aid deal initially mooted for Saleh with the post-Saleh government. Boosting the economy is vital to Yemen's future security and stability.
- ▶ Ensure this aid deal is incentivized. The more plurality within the coalition government, and the more that this government does to alleviate the issues that blight Yemen – inflation, unemployment etc. – the more aid the U.S. should be willing to donate.
- ▶ Encourage Yemen's neighbours – especially Saudi Arabia – to honour existing aid programmes.
- ▶ Offer administrative personnel and expertise to the post-Saleh government.
- ▶ Ensure that the CIA has the finances to recruit larger numbers of anti-AQAP informants on the ground.
- ▶ Impress upon the post-Saleh government the serious threat posed by AQAP – both to security and their domestic economy.
- ▶ Stress the importance of restarting missile and aircraft strikes and using armed drones. In return, offer comprehensive CT training and intelligence sharing.

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The Henry Jackson Society is named after United States Democrat Senator, Henry M. Jackson. The Society is a registered charity for the understanding and articulation of democratic geopolitics—a proactive and principled foreign policy which differentiates between constitutionally governed countries and autocratic regimes.

'In matters of national security, the best politics is no politics.'

— Henry M. Jackson

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End notes

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