



Yemen on the brink of civil war?

Standard Note: SNIA/5998

Last updated: 9 June 2011

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Section International Affairs and Defence Section

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- Regional and tribal rebellions, some allegedly with the involvement of members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, are gaining in strength.
 - Tribal forces have been manoeuvring for power as the end of Saleh's rule comes closer, and have been involved in supporting and even instigating the pro-democracy movements.
 - The defection of Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar was a turning point, after which the conflict looked increasingly like a civil war
 - President Saleh's injury in a rocket attack has broken the deadlock and it is unlikely that he will be able to return to power, but this has left a vacuum in the country
 - Given the forces that are positioning themselves to compete for power, and Yemen's very weak democratic culture, the likelihood that the demands of pro-democracy demonstrators will be fulfilled seems small.
 - At best, Yemen may avoid a fully-fledged civil war and the transition to a stable replacement for the current regime may take place relatively quickly. It is quite possible, however, that instability and conflict may persist for some time.
 - The reaction of Saudis will be important. They may or may not allow Saleh to return to Yemen as soon as he is recovered. They are said to support General Mohsen al-Ahmar but it is not clear that he would win western support.
 - Western powers do not appear to have a clear favourite replacement leader

For more information on Yemen, see these Library Standard Notes:

[Global violent jihad](#), 22 December 2011

[Yemen](#), 23 July 2010

[Turmoil in the Middle East](#), 30 March 2011

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Contents

1	Promises of reform	2
2	Defection of Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar	2
3	GCC mediation efforts	3
4	Increasing violence	3
5	Elite power struggle	4
6	The attack on the president's mosque	4
7	Yemen without Saleh	5
8	Conclusion	6
9	Map of the Middle East	7
10	Map of Yemen	8

1 Promises of reform

25 February saw the biggest democracy demonstration in Yemeni history, as 180,000 marched in the capital, Sana'a and more than 150,000 demonstrated in other parts of the country, according to local news sources. Shortly after this, President Saleh and the official opposition agreed a tentative reform programme, which included an undertaking on the part of President Saleh to step down by the end of 2011. A week later, however, on 8 March reports emerged of a breakdown of the understanding. Violence increased, and it was alleged by the pro-democracy demonstrators that members of the security forces disguised as pro-government civilians were firing on the democracy activists.

On 11 March, a large demonstration was called in Sana'a. Some 100,000 demonstrators turned out and the day was dubbed the "Friday of no return". For months the deadlock between opposition forces and President Saleh could not be broken, but in mid-March, a growing number of government officials and businessmen announced the end of their support for Saleh. Support for the government was particularly hit by an incident on 18 March when snipers killed more than 50 demonstrators at a pro-democracy encampment in the capital. A state of emergency was declared, allowing the government to detain civilians without charge and to ban the carrying of weapons.

2 Defection of Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar

Shortly after the killings of 18 March, Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, President Saleh's half brother, commander of the 1st Armoured Division and seen as Yemen's second most powerful figure, defected. He demanded the resignation of Saleh and promised to protect demonstrators from violence. Other generals defected at the same time.

This was a turning point in Yemen's crisis. Major General al-Ahmar may not be well-known, but he has been a central figure in Yemen's security establishment for decades. Not only is he one of the top officers in the army, he is reported to have accumulated enormous wealth

through his interests in the oil industry,¹ allegedly making millions of dollars through the smuggling of diesel. He has used this fortune to build up a patronage network, paying salaries to thousands of people in the security forces and in powerful tribal positions.

A struggle for influence between Saleh and al-Ahmar had been brewing for some time, as was shown by a leaked diplomatic cable from the US Saudi embassy. When Saudi forces were fighting the Houthi insurgency in the north of Yemen,² the Saudis told the Americans that the Yemeni government had supplied them with the coordinates of al-Ahmar's home, saying that it was a rebel base and inviting them to destroy it.³

3 GCC mediation efforts

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has made persistent attempts to resolve the crisis in Yemen. While it is accepted that Saudi Arabia has easily the biggest influence over events in Yemen, which it traditionally views as its 'back yard', Yemenis can be sensitive about their relations with the Saudis, and a joint approach from the GCC is thought to have been helpful.⁴

On 25 March, Saleh made a speech to thousands of supporters in which he said that he might step aside and transfer power to a "safe pair of hands" to avoid further bloodshed.⁵ The GCC attempted to work on this suggestion, making a series of initiatives through April attempting to find the right incentives to persuade Saleh to step aside.

Then, on 23 April, mediation efforts culminated in a proposal for a 30-day handover period to a transitional unity government, and immunity from prosecution for President Saleh and his family. Both the official opposition and Saleh indicated their readiness to accept the proposal, although the pro-democracy movement always rejected it.

After initially signalling his intention to accept the deal, however, Saleh failed to sign the agreement. GCC diplomats made exasperated but unsuccessful efforts to persuade Saleh to sign the agreement, until 22 May, when a tense situation developed as the United Arab Emirates' embassy in Sana'a was surrounded by pro-Saleh demonstrators, trapping GCC and western diplomats inside. The convoy of the GCC's top negotiator also came under attack from demonstrators. The diplomats were rescued after a few hours, with the help of Yemeni security forces.

Shortly after these incidents, the GCC announced that it was abandoning its attempts to broker a transition, essentially leaving the matter in the hands of Yemenis and western diplomats.⁶

4 Increasing violence

General al-Ahmar's defection took a substantial part of the armed forces into the opposition camp. Tanks controlled by al-Ahmar took up positions to protect the student-led protests in the capital. However, with the armed forces split in two (the family of the president remained

¹ "Rebel' General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, Yemen's back-up ruler after Saleh", *The National*, 24 May 2011

² For more information on the regional fractures in Yemen, see the Library Standard Note *Yemen*, 23 July 2010

³ Ginny Hill and Gerd Nonneman, *Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests and Regional Diplomacy*, Chatham House, May 2011

⁴ Ginny Hill and Gerd Nonneman, *Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States: Elite Politics, Street Protests and Regional Diplomacy*, Chatham House, May 2011, p5

⁵ "Yemen's Saleh says wants to put power in safe hands", *Reuters*, 25 March 2011

⁶ "Gulf countries abandon Yemen mediation efforts as standoff continues", Morning brief, *Foreign Policy*, 23 May 2011

in charge of a large part) the conflict in Yemen increasingly looked like a power struggle within the elite rather than a grassroots democratic movement.

Parts of the capital have been taken over at times by anti-government forces. Added to the confrontation in the capital, the Yemeni government's regional troubles continued to mount up. In March, northern rebels took over most of the town of Sa'ada, near the Saudi border.⁷ Later in the month, unrest spread further, with rebellions taking control of six out of Yemen's 18 provinces, both in the north and the south of the country.

In April, demonstrations continued throughout the country, with police firing on unarmed demonstrators, and in May, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office withdrew a large part of the Sana'a embassy staff. Oil companies and other international groups also began to withdraw personnel.⁸

5 Elite power struggle

Disappointed democracy demonstrators fear that the democracy movement has been hijacked by powerful figures close to the regime who are jockeying for the succession when President Saleh finally leaves. Most discussion centres on the Ahmar family. They are *not* related to General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who is Saleh's half brother. But the powerful Ahmar family includes Hamid al-Ahmar, a prominent businessman and member of the Islah party, who is reported to have paid demonstrators in Sana'a.

Sadiq al-Ahmar is now head of both the Ahmar family and the Hashid tribal federation, said to be the second most powerful in the country.⁹ Another brother, Hussein al-Ahmar was a member of the President's ruling party until his resignation in February.

The fighting signals end to a deal that kept Yemen united since 1978, when Saleh assumed the presidency backed by Sheikh Abdullah al-Ahmar. Abdullah al-Ahmar died in 2007 and his sons are vying to take over

Other tribal leaders pledged their support for Saleh,¹⁰ as the conflict increasingly took on tribal and regional overtones, as well as being focussed on existing members of the elite. Saleh's eldest son, Ahmed Ali, and his nephews Tarik, Yahya and Amar are also positioning themselves for the succession. Ahmed heads the elite Republican Guard, Yahya commands Yemen's Central Security Forces.

In contrast, the democracy movement remained fragmented and without a clear leader, and looked increasingly marginalised.

6 The attack on the president's mosque

On 3 June, a rocket attack on the mosque in the presidential palace wounded President Saleh. Initial reports suggested that the injuries were not serious, but he was flown to Saudi Arabia for treatment nevertheless. Presidential spokesmen suggested that he would return to Yemen to continue ruling within a week.

⁷ "Rebels claim control of city", *Financial Times*, 25 March 2011

⁸ "British embassy staff leave Sana'a with 'immediate effect'", *Financial Times*, 24 March 2011

⁹ "Background: Saleh's eroding support", *al-Jazeera*, 28 February 2011

¹⁰ "Yemeni President Rallies Tribal Support", *Wall Street Journal*, 27 February 2011

The attack was attributed to “rival tribal leaders”,¹¹ and some reports said that it was possibly a bomb, suggesting that rivals were controlling members of Saleh’s security personnel.

Shortly afterwards it emerged that his injuries were more significant than admitted at first by Saleh’s staff. The pulpit in the mosque had been exploded, leaving President Saleh with 40% burns and splinters of wood penetrating his chest, perhaps leading to the collapse of a lung.

7 Yemen without Saleh

As the extent of President Saleh’s injuries in the mosque attack became clear, attention turned to the political vacuum that his departure left in Yemen. Although relative calm reigned in the capital Sana’a, outbreaks of violence were widespread in the rest of the country.

A GCC official said that the Council would leave the US and the Europeans to take the lead in convincing Mr Saleh not to return to Yemen, but the fact of his receiving treatment in Saudi Arabia certainly reduced the possibility that he would return to rule, given the Saudi government’s preference for him to transfer power to a transitional government.

Vice President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi has taken over control while President Saleh is recovering, but the Saudis and the US have encouraged members of the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) that they should start preparing for a post-Saleh Yemen and work with the Vice President on a transition of power. However, the JMP is composed of a disparate collection of socialist, Islamist and other parties, and it is far from clear that it has the support of democracy activists or much of the population at large.

While it is difficult to imagine Saleh returning to rule, a transfer of power to a broad-based government is in no way guaranteed. The Republican Guard and central security forces are in the hands of Saleh’s family and some 50,000 to 60,000 troops are still loyal. Some of these are the best-trained and equipped forces in Yemen, including US-trained anti-terrorism fighters who have turned out to fight democracy demonstrators and hostile tribal forces.¹²

One important question is whether the armed forces controlled by Saleh’s family will accept the command of the Vice President, currently nominally in power. The Republican Guard, controlled by Saleh’s son Ahmed, is key.

Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, who has about 40,000 troops under his control along with heavy armoury, is said to be Saudi Arabia’s favourite for the transition from Saleh’s rule. Indeed, one expert has said that the kingdom would accept no other alternative to Saleh.¹³ However, western governments may not be so happy about the prospect of General al-Ahmar assuming control. He is reported to maintain close links to al-Qaeda.¹⁴

On 7 June, British Foreign Secretary William Hague mentioned the situation in Yemen in a statement on the Middle East and North Africa, outlining the government’s concern about the situation there and strongly advised any British nationals still in the country to leave immediately:

The situation in Yemen is extremely uncertain following President Saleh’s departure to Saudi Arabia to receive medical treatment and his transfer of authority to the Vice-

¹¹ “[Yemen’s Uncertain Political Future](#)”, Interview with Bernard Haykel, Council on Foreign Relations, 7 June 2011.

¹² “Rebel general fights Yemen regime”, *Wall Street Journal*, 2 June 2011

¹³ ‘Rebel’ General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, Yemen’s back-up ruler after Saleh”, *The National*, 24 May 2011

¹⁴ “Old soldier with al-Qaeda links waits in the wings”, *Times*, 23 March 2011

President. We urge the Vice-President to work closely with all sides to implement the Gulf Co-operation Council agreement and to begin political transition now. Yemen faces huge humanitarian and economic challenges, and the Yemeni Government need to dedicate all their efforts to confront the impending crisis, with international support.

Recent events have shown just how quickly the security situation in Yemen can deteriorate into ferocious and unpredictable fighting. It is of the utmost importance that all British nationals leave the country immediately by commercial means while it is still possible to do so, as we have advised them to do since 12 March. I warn again that it will be extremely unlikely that the British Government will be able to evacuate British nationals from Yemen.¹⁵

8 Conclusion

Yemen's history as a unified state is short and the government's control of national territory has generally been tenuous. Regional and tribal rebellions, some allegedly with the involvement of members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, are gaining in strength.

The traditional method of holding the country together has been patronage, but the money that has backed this approach is running out.¹⁶ Tribal forces have been manoeuvring for power as the end of Saleh's rule comes closer, and have been involved in supporting and even instigating the pro-democracy movements.

Given the forces that are positioning themselves to compete for power, and Yemen's very weak democratic culture and divided polity, the likelihood that the demands of pro-democracy demonstrators will be fulfilled seems small. At best, the country will avoid a fully-fledged civil war and the transition to a stable replacement for the current regime will take place relatively quickly. It is quite possible, however, that instability and conflict will persist for some time.

The reaction of Saudis will be important, but some experts claim that their favourite, General Mohsen al-Ahmar, is not viable because he is too implicated in the existing regime.¹⁷ It is also not clear that he would win western support. On the other hand, there has been no clear indication of what alternative leader the west would support. The pro-democracy demonstrators have no leader and the official opposition lacks support and legitimacy.

¹⁵ HC Deb 7 June 2011, c31-5

¹⁶ For more background on Yemen's economic difficulties, see the Library Standard Note [Yemen](#), 23 July 2010

¹⁷ "[Yemen's Uncertain Political Future](#)", Interview with Bernard Haykel, Council on Foreign Relations, 7 June 2011.

9 Map of the Middle East



Geographic Support Main Building, DGC, GSGS 11645, Edition 7, July 2002 736/02
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10 Map of Yemen

