



The Last Best Chance to Save Yemen

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Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh's forced departure to Saudi Arabia to receive urgent medical care provides the United States and its allies an unexpected opportunity to end the violent, multisided fighting gripping the poorest Arab nation.

Even though Saleh is out of the country, his family and supporters remain in control of what is left of his government and Saleh has pledged to return in a matter of days. The window will soon close on preventing an all-out civil war in a country that has been plagued by violence, economic decline, and humanitarian distress even before this latest crisis.

Of all the countries gripped with unrest during the Arab Spring, Yemen poses the most direct concerns to the security of the United States and the region. The fighting between powerful tribes and the remaining elements of President Saleh's government has created an opening for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, to gain territory and safe areas to train and plan attacks on Saudi Arabia, the United States, and other countries.

Yemen's geographic location near major shipping lanes and close to Somalia also raises the potential for a new base of operations for pirates should Yemen collapse entirely. Fighting in Yemen in 2010 unrelated to the current crisis briefly crossed the Saudi border and any new conflict poses significant risks for regional stability.

The United States must move beyond mere calls for Saleh to relinquish power and put in place a package of punitive actions and incentives to use what little leverage it has to try and head off more violence and genuinely improve the conditions in Yemen after Saleh goes. This package should include:

- Urging all parties to abide by the cease-fire while Saleh is out of the country and pressing Saudi Arabia to delay or prevent him from returning to Yemen
- Proposing a revised transition plan based on Gulf Cooperation Council framework but transferring authority over security services away from the Saleh family and maintaining right of peaceful protest

- Suspending military assistance and weapons transfers while the Yemeni government shoots its own people
- Imposing targeted travel, financial, and other economic sanctions on Saleh, his family, and other senior figures that remain in his government in an effort to further isolate them
- Capitalize on the lull in fighting to announce an immediate humanitarian relief effort to help the Yemeni people, who were already suffering from a dire humanitarian situation before the recent crisis has accelerated Yemen's economic spiral
- Announcing a package of economic and development assistance for a post-Saleh Yemen

The United States should be under no illusions that these or other actions would magically end the current crisis or transform Yemen into Switzerland. Given the stakes, however, general frustration and limited capacity to bring about a complete solution is no excuse to stop pushing the parties towards a resolution, and importantly, to help shape the post-Saleh Yemen and the standing of the United States with Yemenis.

Multiple ongoing crises pre-date latest political unrest

Yemen is a state in perpetual crisis always seemingly on the brink of chaos. There have been sporadic violent clashes throughout much of the last decade between government forces and Shiite rebels known as the Houthis in the north along Yemen's border with Saudi Arabia. The fighting escalated through the summer 2010, even spilling across the Saudi border, but ended with a fragile cease-fire signed in August 2010. The Houthis have participated in the protests against the Saleh regime that began in January, but have not been the leading faction or the driving force behind the most recent violence.

In the south, which was once the independent South Yemen before unification with the North in 1990, a renewed separatist movement that has been largely peaceful yet still marked by some violent incidents threatens the stability of a unified Yemen. And the terrorist group al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, has established a base of operations in Yemen's vast ungoverned spaces and has launched attacks on the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

Beyond these hard security challenges, the Yemeni economy is collapsing and the country faces severe water shortages and an exploding population that is already lacking adequate food supplies. Oil revenue accounts for nearly three-quarters of all government revenue but its oil reserves are running out. The World Bank predicts output will fall to zero by 2017. The loss of oil revenue will be catastrophic in a country that already has more than 40 percent of its population living on less than two dollars a day.

And it's not just the oil that is running out; water too is in increasingly short supply. The majority of Yemen's 21 aquifers are being depleted more rapidly than they can be replenished. Its capital, Sana'a, is predicted to be the first world capital to run out of water, perhaps as soon as 14 years from now. Add to these problems a population that is expected to double to more than 45 million in the next 20 years, and it is not hard to see why Yemeni's have many other enormous challenges that rank higher on their list than terrorism.

President Saleh's patronage-based grip on power

Saleh has mastered the art of doling out favors and massaging key tribes or political factions throughout his 30-plus years as president. The vast patronage network has allowed him to rule in such a fractured and unstable country since 1978. Secretive payments by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and nonworking jobs at schools and hospitals pay out cash to approximately 6,000 tribal sheikhs, who in turn assure Saleh of their tribe's support for the regime. These extremely costly payments have devastated the Yemeni economy and bankrupted the nation. According to USAID, approximately 40 percent of Yemeni school employees are nonworking, patronage positions. Nearly 6 percent of the government budget is devoted to paying tribesmen for work that they do not do at Yemeni schools.

The continuation of Saleh's patronage system has been increasingly expensive for a nation as poor as Yemen. As a result, Saudi Arabia has supplemented some of the payments in order to ensure stability on its borders. According to several reports, Riyadh was the primary funder of the Ahmar family, the most important rival tribe to Saleh's family. This April, however, Saudi Arabia halted all patronage payments as part of its removal of support for the Saleh regime.

The growing costs and financial constraints caused by the current crisis have led to accusations that Saleh has pilfered the Central Bank's currency reserves and demanded multimillion-dollar loans from Yemen's richest businessmen in order to keep the patronage system from falling apart. Despite his best attempts, Saleh appears to be losing the battle to keep the patronage network intact, which has accelerated the rate of tribal and military defections from his regime.

One key pillar of Saleh's patronage system remains unbroken: the key positions within the state's security apparatus filled by his family members. While several top commanders within the Yemeni military have defected to the opposition, Saleh has prevented further defection thanks to the tight control he has over the Republican Forces, Central Security Forces, Private Presidential Guards, National Security Organization, and Air Force where his sons and nephews hold the highest level of power in each organization.

Yemen's Arab Spring

Inspired by the Tunisian revolution, Yemen's already fractious population began protesting President Saleh's 30-year reign and economic policies in January 2011. Saleh offered a series of half-hearted political compromises as the protests grew in size and scope, including developing a parliamentary system of government and offering to step down at the end of his term. The increasingly harsh tactics used by Saleh's security apparatus against the protestors led to the defection of several of his senior military commanders.

Fear of what could come after Saleh's departure had at least in part restrained American and Saudi-led efforts to push the Yemeni president to step down. By early April, however, it was clear that Saleh had become so weak that concerns over a possible successor regime were moot and his deplorable actions made his survival untenable. The United States, along with the Saudis and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC, began pushing for Saleh to step down and ended payoffs to Yemeni tribes.

President Saleh agreed to sign a deal brokered by the GCC in April that would give him immunity from prosecution in exchange for stepping down, only to back out from the signing ceremony at the last moment on three separate occasions. His third refusal to sign the GCC deal led to an open break between the Saleh government and key Yemeni tribes who had already lost revenue from the Saudis because of Saleh's antics.

The powerful Hashed tribal alliance led by Sadeq al-Ahmar, unleashed its fighters against government forces, which led to the death of more than 155 people in only 10 days. On June 3, a large explosion, reportedly from a bomb planted in the presidential palace, injured Saleh, forcing him to travel to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment. Clashes in Sana'a have quieted since Saleh's departure, but his family is still in Yemen controlling the country's security apparatus, and there are growing concerns over the political vacuum his absence has created. While Yemeni officials claim that Saleh is due to return "within days," new reports indicate that his injuries are much more serious than originally reported and will more likely need months to recover from the burns sustained in the explosion.

The Gulf Cooperation Council Transition Plan

The most recent iteration of the GCC treaty granted President Saleh immunity from prosecution in exchange for transferring executive power to the vice president within a week and formally resigning as president within a month of signing the treaty. Opposition leaders would immediately halt all protests and stay off the streets throughout the transition process. A unity government composed of both ruling and opposition leaders would be formed, and both parliamentary and presidential elections would occur two months after Saleh's resignation.

The GCC deal is currently the only plan for a peaceful political resolution to the conflict on the table, and while realities on the ground have changed since Saleh's last rejection, it provides a decent framework for an end to the crisis. The first step of the agreement, the nominal transfer of executive authority to Vice President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi has already occurred, albeit under different circumstances than envisioned in the deal. Opposition leaders have stated they will accept Hadi as a transition leader, and he has the potential to play a very positive role in Yemen's move to a post-Saleh government, yet the true power of the Yemeni state in Saleh's absence remains with the leadership of the security services.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula benefiting from unrest and violence

The threat from AQAP is real. They have been implicated in at least three attacks on the U.S. homeland—the successful shooting by Major Nidal Hassan at Ft. Hood; the unsuccessful bombing of a Detroit-bound airliner on Christmas Day 2009; and the foiled bombing of cargo aircraft with explosives placed in toner cartridges in 2010. It is likely the terrorist group's intent on attacking the United States will not wane given the prominence within AQAP of Anwar al-Alawki, the U.S. born recruiter who is considered one of the most important inspirational figures within the al-Qaeda network.

There have been conflicting accounts of AQAP advances during the most recent phase of the fighting. Some reports claim Islamists—identifying themselves by a name AQAP has used—took over the town of Zinjibar, but others indicate that this could be merely a ploy by Saleh to demonstrate the perils of forcing him out. It is impossible for outside observers to know the veracity of these reports, but it does seem clear that AQAP is taking advantage of the political unrest and violence to either consolidate its position or gain territory. The proximity—just 160 miles across the Gulf of Aden—to Somalia and the potential for alliance or coordination with the al Shabaab terrorist movement there increases the need to target and disrupt AQAP activities.

But it would be a mistake to view the challenge of Yemen exclusively through the lens of terrorism or hard security threats. Simply put, there is no U.S. or other outside military solution to the multiple ongoing crises in Yemen. Yemen is not Afghanistan in the 1990s, there is no radical Islamist movement that can take over Yemen and allow AQAP sanctuary similar to the Taliban and al Qaeda central. The best way to blunt AQAP's advance is to put Yemen on a more stable political and economic path, not rely on kinetic military operations.

Current U.S. policy toward Yemen

The Obama administration has invested significant time and resources to both broaden and deepen the U.S. relationship with the Yemeni government to help it fight terrorism and deal with other security crises as the terrorist threat from AQAP has grown. Deputy National Security Adviser John Brennan has made at least four trips to meet with President Saleh and flew out to the region just last week to confer on the crisis with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the two key players in the GCC.

The Obama administration has significantly increased counterterrorism and military assistance to Yemen since the failed Christmas Day plot, more than doubling it to \$150 million in 2010 and adding another \$100 on top of that for 2011. The U.S. government has also provided counterterrorism and other military assistance to the Yemenis totaling more than \$500 million since 2009. While this aid package does not compare with those to Egypt or Pakistan, it is a meaningful contribution to Yemen's national security resources and does give the United States some leverage.

According to *The New York Times*, the United States has intensified its drone and air-strike campaign against AQAP since the latest fighting began and Saleh's forces shifted away from counterterrorism. The report only cites two specific incidents, so it is difficult to ascertain the full extent of this U.S. activity. While this kind of kinetic operation can be useful as part of a broad strategy that seeks to both counter threats emanating from Yemen and assist the country's economic and political development, such action on its own is virtually certain to be counterproductive.

First, such actions are prone to manipulation by local actors or simply bad intelligence information, both endemic in the chaotic environment of Yemen today. Second, even when successful, civilian casualties—or even just the claim of civilian casualties—severely alienates the local population the potential for blowback to erase any tactical benefit from these strikes is very high. If the sum total of U.S. policy in Yemen can be described as “death from above,” then the United States will not be popular and we may even engender greater sympathy among the local population for those we target.

Package of punitive actions, humanitarian relief, and economic incentives

The default expectation for far too many in the United States and around the world is for America to fix this problem or resolve that crisis. The reality is that even a country as powerful as the United States has limited capacity to affect change and that is especially true in a country facing as many problems as Yemen. The ultimate resolution of the crisis in Yemen is the responsibility of the Yemenis. But the United States must not be consigned to a policy of saying to President Saleh, “Go, or we’ll say go again,” and should use what leverage it has in an attempt to steer the parties towards a peaceful resolution of this latest crisis.

Call for explicit cease-fire and urge Saudis to delay or prevent Saleh from returning to Yemen

President Saleh's departure to Saudi Arabia is the only reason for the current breathing space in the political crisis in Yemen. Jubilation erupted in the streets of Sana'a as it looked like Saleh had transferred power to his deputy. The vice president has assumed the powers of the presidency but it is clear that the remaining elements of the Saleh regime believe that he will return to power. It seems nothing is ever easy in Yemen.

Fighting has significantly died down since Saleh's departure when Saudi King Abdullah quickly negotiated a fragile cease-fire, but sporadic clashes persist. The cease-fire could unravel at any moment, especially if expectations build on any side regarding Saleh's prospects for return. It is vital to consolidate this breathing space with an explicit cease-fire while Saleh is in Saudi Arabia. This does not need to be a formal agreement, merely a public pledge by the major fighting factions—the Hashed tribe, the breakaway military units, and the government—to cease attacks.

AQAP is unlikely to abide by any cease-fire and is a major complicating factor that could make any genuine cease-fire elusive. It is not hard to imagine a scenario when one party cites an alleged AQAP attack as justification for retaliation or other action. But a cessation of attacks by the main fighting parties to this latest phase of the conflict would be an unequivocal positive and allow for a return to negotiations to resolve the political crisis.

It is vital that this window made possible by Saleh's departure be extended as long as possible to ensure the maximum leverage can be used for the United States and the GCC to peel off enough of the Saleh government so that his return to power becomes impossible. The United States should urge the Saudis to delay Saleh's return for as long as possible.

Propose a revised transition plan

The attacks on protesters and the general violence that has marked the period since Saleh reneged on the GCC plan for the third time may prevent a return to the original terms of the deal. Yet the first phase of the plan, transferring authority to Vice President Hadi, has occurred. The main challenge at this phase in the transition is that Hadi does not have his own base of power or support and Saleh's son and nephew still control the security services.

The problems with the Yemeni government, however, are systemic and do not reside solely in President Saleh. Saleh's sons and nephews must relinquish control of the security services to an agreed neutral party to truly improve the structure of the government. In exchange for giving up these posts, they will be included in the immunity deal that President Saleh was offered for giving up power.

After credible allegations that the security services attacked and killed unarmed protesters, this extension of immunity will be a bitter pill for the opposition to swallow. In exchange, the opposition should retain the right of peaceful protest through the transition process in order to ensure the voice of the people of Yemen can be heard as the country establishes a new political order.

Suspend military aid

While it appears that that U.S. military assistance has either slowed significantly or stopped during the current crisis, there has been no formal announcement that the United States has suspended military assistance to the Yemeni government. Concerns that a suspension of such assistance may benefit AQAP during the current crisis are understandable but incorrect. It is clear that AQAP is taking advantage of the crisis, but the best way to stop that is to end the current crisis. The bottom line is that the Yemeni government is spending its time fighting off a major challenge from powerful tribes and massive popular protests, not targeting AQAP. A suspension of assistance would not impact the fight against terrorism.

One serious potential drawback is that a suspension of military assistance could, although it is unclear, require the United States to withdraw the Joint Special Operations Command unit currently coordinating counterterrorism operations from Sana'a or result in the Yemeni government asking them to leave. This of course has its downsides, but counterterrorism operations absent a broader engagement strategy are just as likely to be counterproductive. Coordination with Yemeni government forces seems extremely minimal at this juncture given the focus of Yemeni forces and nothing would prevent continued cooperation with the military units under the command of General Ali Mushin al-Hamar, who defected to the protesters in March.

Additionally, it is important for Americans to realize that U.S. counterterrorism operations and our military support for President Saleh are deeply unpopular with Yemenis. While terrorism is our number one concern about Yemen, it ranks far down most Yemenis' list of concerns given all the troubles in their country.

A U.S. military aid suspension would certainly not mean that Saleh's guns fall silent, but the United States simply cannot continue to provide weapons to a country that uses them to kill peaceful pro-democracy protesters.

Implement targeted sanctions

While the reach of targeted sanctions may not be deep, the precarious nature of Saleh's current political position, his extensive use of a patronage system that requires constant funding, and his increasing reliance on the United States for security assistance show

that an international sanctions regime could fatally weaken Saleh's grip on power. Unlike Syria, where the United States sanctioned itself out of influence prior to the current crisis, the Yemeni security apparatus' increasingly close relationship with the United States makes it much more vulnerable to a cessation of assistance and equipment.

A unilateral decision by the U.S. government to freeze assets and halt wire transfers to Saleh and his family members—including his sons and nephews who control the country's security services—would have a far reaching impact on the way foreign nations view and address requests by the Saleh family to use their financial institutions. While large foreign banks often informally abide by U.S. sanctions against individuals, the participation of the Gulf nations in targeted sanctions will be crucial given the amount of Yemeni money that is likely held in foreign financial centers such as Dubai. Though these sanctions may not be decisive, they will send a clear message that actions do have real consequences and could help change the calculations of those around Saleh about the value of staying by his side or bringing about an end to this political crisis.

Provide immediate humanitarian relief

This latest crisis is just one among many that the people of Yemen have been forced to endure in recent years. With more than 40 percent of the population living on less than two dollars a day, their humanitarian situation was already precarious. Now the multisided clashes between Saleh, former military commanders, major tribes, and AQAP threatens a full-scale humanitarian disaster.

Clearly, the ongoing fighting makes the delivery of relief supplies difficult, but during the cease-fire while Saleh is out of the country it is possible for the nongovernmental organizations, with U.S. and GCC support, to deliver immediate critical aid to the Yemeni people. Additionally, Saleh's absence from the country provides an opportunity to call for a temporary cease-fire to allow humanitarian relief to come in. The most important issue of concern is the growing water shortage throughout the nation. Yemen already faced water supply issues as the most water poor nation in the Middle East, but the loss of domestic oil, which powers the drills that pump water, has cut off large sections of the population to water supplies.

Disaster relief organizations should immediately start supplying the population with water supplies, while the United States simultaneously works with Saudi Arabia to divert nearby diesel fuel to get the water pumps up and running again. The next priority will be to reconnect the country's electrical grid, which has largely been shut down by rebel tribes, and give the population access to electricity again. Coming to the direct aid of the Yemeni people during this crisis is not only morally the right thing to do, but it would improve the standing of the United States with the population on the verge of a major political transition.

Introduce a package of economic incentives for a post-Saleh Yemen

The violence and political turmoil in Yemen has cost the country \$5 billion—17 percent of its GDP—and put the poorest country in the Middle East on the verge of economic collapse. Whoever leads the next Yemeni government will need significant support far beyond military assistance to fight terrorism.

As President Obama highlighted during his speech on the Middle East two weeks ago, the unrest across the region largely reflects a frustration with limited economic opportunity. The United States should make clear that it is prepared to assist a post-Saleh Yemen with a package of economic aid and development programs. Economic assistance in a post-Saleh Yemen should center around three key issues: establishing a postoil economy, developing the country's agricultural sector, and implementing a smarter water strategy.

The economic challenges of Yemen are not ones that the United States could or should help solve on its own, as the other Arab Gulf nations have significant interest in seeing a stable Yemen on its borders. President Obama should call on Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar to use their oil and natural gas wealth to develop a debt relief and investment program similar to what the president proposed for Egypt and Tunisia. At the very least, the money for tribal patronage paid for by Saudi Arabia should be diverted to strategic investment in the Yemeni economy. The details of what role the United States and regional partners will play in Yemen's economic future will need to be addressed in close cooperation with the leaders of Yemen's next government to ensure that economic policies and assistance are coordinated for effectiveness.

There are genuine tradeoffs by promoting such active involvement by the Gulf nations, who have proven reluctant to allow an open, democratic nation to grow on their borders. Given our domestic fiscal restraints and limited ties to the future leaders of Yemen, however, coordinating our priorities for Yemen's future with the capabilities of our regional partners will be essential to putting Yemen on the path toward stability.

Conclusion

The latest bout of political violence in Yemen threatens to push an already fractured country into a genuine failed state. While it is true we have limited capacity to end the violence and political unrest, the United States must take advantage of the last remaining window of opportunity—Saleh's forced departure to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment—to help bring about a peaceful resolution to the crisis.