



Volume 6, Special Edition No. 1

January 31, 2012

Stalemate in Yemen

Brian Albert

The departure of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Salih to the United States for medical treatment marks the latest twist in Yemen's ongoing turmoil, but may not be a decisive moment. Indeed, Salih has already been out of the country for an extended period, having convalesced in Saudi Arabia from wounds sustained in a failed attempt on his life. His return to Sanaa on September 23rd defied the expectations of many observers, as well as the efforts of Saudi and American officials to persuade him to relinquish power from abroad. While there have been political developments since then, events on the ground reflect an ongoing stalemate, as Yemen continues its slow-motion collapse.

While Salih was recuperating in Saudi Arabia, Vice President Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi was nominally in charge. Hadi has been vice president of Yemen since 1994, when a secessionist southern movement was defeated in a civil war with the Northern central government. Himself a southerner, Hadi was the ideal choice to be Salih's number two, putatively deficient in charisma and ambition.¹ It would be more accurate to say that during Salih's summer absence, ruling Yemen remained a family affair. Salih's son, Ahmed, remained in charge of the

¹ Johnsen, Gregory. "Yemen's New Acting President: Abd Rabu Who?" *Waq al-Waq* June 5, 2011, accessed January 17, 2012 available: <http://bigthink.com/ideas/38738>

Republican Guard forces, and kept Hadi locked out of the presidential palace in Sanaa.²

Salih's credibility is virtually nonexistent as far as the opposition is concerned. There were several reports in the spring that he had agreed to a peaceful transition of power brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but he reneged at the last minute each time. Salih did finally sign the agreement in a publicized meeting in Riyadh on November 23rd, but there were good reasons to suspect that the crisis was not yet over. For starters, two of Salih's greatest rivals were not among the opposition that had also agreed to the deal: Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, the general who in March defected along with his 1st Armored Division, and Hamid al-Ahmar (no relation), the paramount sheikh of the large Hashid tribal confederation. Both Ali Mohsen's soldiers and Hamid's armed tribesmen have fought with loyalist Republican Guard units in and around the capital Sanaa. With armed forces at their disposal, they are positioned to sabotage any agreement that would cut them out of the loop.

Yemenis' reactions to the signing of the GCC deal exposed a rift within the opposition. While the leaders of Yemen's opposition political parties agreed to a deal that calls for early elections, most ordinary Yemenis strongly object to the clause that grants immunity to the President and his family from prosecution.³

The recent conquest of the town of Rada' on January 15th by fighters of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) indicates that the situation in the country is going from bad to worse. Located 170km southeast of Sanaa, Rada' is the capital of Al-Baidah Province, and the site of a prison from which the AQAP fighters reportedly freed 150 prisoners. This is not the first time that AQAP has seized and held territory in Yemen. Last May, they overran the southern coastal town of Zinjibar. Then as now, critics accused President Salih of intentionally allowing AQAP to make these gains in an effort to cast himself as the indispensable bulwark against a takeover of all of Yemen. Ostensible evidence to that effect was provided by reports that the few soldiers stationed in Rada' offered no resistance to the militants when they entered the town.⁴

² Schmitz, Charles. "Yemen's Unhappy Ending" *Foreign Policy* September 27, 2011, accessed January 17, 2012 http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/09/27/yemens_unhappy_ending?page=0,0

³ Finn, Tom. "Yemen president quits after deal in Saudi Arabia" *The Guardian* November 23, 2011. accessed January 17, 2012 available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/23/yemen-president-quits>

⁴ Shaher, Malak. "Al-Qaeda enters al-Baidah's Rada' capital" *Yemen Times* January 16, 2012 accessed January 17, 2012 available: http://yementimes.com/defaultdet.aspx?SUB_ID=35087

The withering of central authority is even more apparent in the northern province of Sa'dah. For all intents and purposes, the Houthi rebels, who have since 2004 waged an intermittent insurgency against Sanaa, have achieved full control of the province. More than this, they are attempting to expand their control into neighboring provinces of al-Jawf, 'Amran, and Hajja.⁵

With government forces otherwise engaged in Sanaa and other large cities, the Shiite Houthis were free to lay siege to the town of Dammaj, which is an important learning center for Salafi Sunnis. Although a ceasefire was brokered in December, Salafis within Dammaj still claim that the Houthis are not allowing humanitarian aid into the town, a charge that the Houthis deny.⁶

Concurrently, the government is sending mixed signals that early elections will be held as planned on February 21st. On January 17th, Yemen's Foreign Minister Abu Bakr al-Qirbi said in an interview with *al-Arabiya* TV that the dismal security situation might make early elections impossible. Another official speaking on condition of anonymity told the Associated Press that Salih had asked Parliament to postpone elections until May 22nd.⁷ US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reacted immediately, stating "We regret that the president has thus far failed to comply with his own commitments to leave the country, to permit elections to go forward that give the people a chance to be heard and be represented."⁸

Both Salih and his opponents appear to have their backs against the wall. Salih stated in late 2011 that he would step down from power but remain in Yemen as an opposition figure. However, even if the GCC-brokered arrangement preserves its immunity clause, Salih will most likely be a marked man for as long as he remains in Yemen. Salih subsequently stated that he would be traveling to the United States for medical treatment. The United States originally denied that it was granting Salih a visa for such a visit, but on January 20th the embattled

⁵ Winter, Lucas. "Riyadh enters the Yemen-Huthi fray" *Middle East Quarterly* Winter 2012, accessed January 19, 2012 available: <http://www.meforum.org/3149/yemen-saudi-arabia>

⁶ Rawi, Anas. "Children vulnerable in Damaj" *Yemen Times* January 12, 2012 accessed January 19, 2012 available: http://www.yementimes.com/defaultdet.aspx?SUB_ID=35072

⁷ AP. "Yemen foreign minister says presidential election will be held on schedule in February" *Washington Post* January 18, 2012 accessed January 19, 2012 available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/yemen-foreign-minister-says-presidential-election-will-be-held-on-schedule-in-february/2012/01/18/gIQAPBT8P_story.html

⁸ AP. "Clinton says Yemen's leader has not lived up to agreements to leave Yemen, permit elections" *Washington Post* January 17, 2012 accessed January 19, 2012 available: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/yemeni-foreign-minister-says-unrest-could-delay-presidential-elections-slated-for-next-month/2012/01/17/gIQAlZH94P_story.html

leader left for the United States via Oman and London.⁹ While US policy calls for Salih to peacefully relinquish power, it is unlikely that Salih will be permitted to remain in the United States indefinitely, for the harm this would do to America's image in Yemen. There was also talk that Salih had requested to stay in Oman, but Omani officials are similarly reluctant to confirm or deny this out of concern for future relations with Yemen.¹⁰ For Salih's opponents, there is also a delicate balancing act. There are fresh protests now against granting Salih or any of his relatives immunity, as had originally been promised, and the opposition must choose between risking the loss of popular support, or renegeing on this promise to Salih and thus risking the unraveling of the agreement altogether.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has criticized the new law granting immunity to Salih, and the United States for allowing him entry for treatment. In a press release HRW states that the immunity law recently approved by Yemen's parliament violates international law, and that the International Criminal Court has the prerogative to prosecute Salih anyway.¹¹

As odious as it may seem, the granting of immunity to Salih is probably the only way to help facilitate a more peaceful power transition in Yemen, and stave off further bloodshed. While in the United States, Salih leaves behind a military whose most highly trained and best-equipped units are still loyal to him. If reconciliation between Salih's supporters and the opposition cannot be reached, then the next government of Yemen will have zero chance of bringing Yemen back from the precipice of failed statehood.

Between the controversy surrounding the immunity clause, and the gains made by AQAP, Salih may be hoping that, against all odds, both Yemenis and foreigners alike will see him as the only alternative to total anarchy. The sole thing that makes this scenario unlikely is that Salih has lost all legitimacy in the eyes of a broad swath of the public. It is even less likely that they would cease protesting as long as Salih is in power. In spite of all of the humanitarian catastrophes, looming and actual, there is no sign that the widespread desire among Yemenis for regime change has been exhausted.

Brian Albert is a master's student in Middle Eastern history at Tel Aviv University and a research assistant at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

⁹ "Yemen's President Saleh 'leaves country' for treatment" BBC News [online] January 22, 2012. Accessed January 29, 2012. available: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16671533>

¹⁰ "Yemen's President Saleh arrives in US" Al Jazeera [online] January 29, 2012. Accessed January 29, 2012. available: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/20121282319299730.html>

¹¹ "Yemen: Amnesty for Saleh and Aides Unlawful" Human Rights Watch. January 23, 2012. Accessed January 29, 2012. available: <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/01/23/yemen-amnesty-saleh-and-aides-unlawful>

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at www.dayan.org, under "Commentary."

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."