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What the President Must Do About Yemen

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As turmoil and transformation sweep across the Middle East and North Africa, President Obama cannot afford to dwell on one crisis at a time. In particular, the United States must not neglect the ongoing crisis in Yemen, a country that has served as a base of operations for terrorist attacks aimed at the U.S. and its allies. A double dose of diplomacy and engagement is now vital to ensure that the U.S. can continue to conduct effective counterterrorism operations in the region.

State of Play. Embattled Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh is quickly losing his grip on power in the face of mushrooming protests against his rule that have been joined by key military, political, and tribal leaders. Saleh now faces an unpalatable choice between stepping down and violently suppressing the populist revolt à la Muammar Qadhafi—one of only two Arab rulers who have been in power longer than Saleh's 32 years.

The U.S. has a major stake in the outcome of this deepening political crisis because of the terrorist threat posed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has established itself in Yemen's tribal badlands. Washington should lead an international effort to support a peaceful transfer of power to a new government that will remain committed to the fight against al-Qaeda terrorism.

Saleh is a canny political survivor who dominated the tumultuous politics of the Arab world's poorest country by exploiting factional and tribal rivalries for more than three decades, but his luck is finally running out. Last Friday, after six weeks of

peaceful protests in the capital city of Sanaa, Saleh's thuggish secret police deployed snipers on rooftops to fire on demonstrators, killing more than 50 and wounding hundreds. On Monday, key members of the government—including Major General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Yemen's top military leader—resigned in protest and demanded that Saleh step down.

General Mohsen has mobilized army forces and deployed tanks in the capital to back up his demands, while Saleh has deployed tanks around his presidential palace to signal his determination to cling to power. The tense standoff could explode at any moment if back-channel talks between Saleh and the opposition do not defuse the situation soon. Saleh has already agreed to step down at the end of the year after new parliamentary elections have taken place, but the opposition insists that he must do so immediately.

Saleh's former allies are now rushing to abandon him. Yemen's major tribes—and even Saleh's own Sanhan tribe—have turned against the President. The opposition is fueled by simmering resentment over the corruption, nepotism, and ineffectiveness of the government in providing jobs, economic

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development, education, and other services to the Yemeni people.

One of the driving forces within the ad hoc opposition coalition is the Islah party, an Islamist movement whose spiritual leader, Sheik Zindani, has been designated as a terrorist by the U.S. government due to his close association with Osama bin Laden. Opposition groups have called for a march on the presidential palace on Friday that could push Yemen to the brink of civil war unless some sort of an agreement can be worked out beforehand.

U.S. Policy Priorities. The foremost U.S. national interest in Yemen is to contain and defeat AQAP, which has emerged as the most urgent threat to homeland security since the al-Qaeda high command was forced to hide in Pakistan's remote tribal areas. AQAP's Anwar al-Aulaqi, an American-born Yemeni cleric, has emerged as a key al-Qaeda leader. He is believed to have inspired Major Nidal Hassan, who perpetrated the 2009 Fort Hood shootings, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the failed suicide bomber who sought to destroy an airliner bound for Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.¹ Aulaqi is also suspected of playing a role in the November 2010 AQAP plot to dispatch parcel bombs to the U.S. in cargo planes.

The U.S. entered an awkward alliance of convenience with Saleh to mobilize more pressure on AQAP. Although preventing AQAP from carving out a secure sanctuary in Yemen is Washington's highest priority, Saleh's regime was always more concerned with the threats posed by the seven-year-old Houthi rebellion in the north and the simmering secessionist movement in southern Yemen, which has flared up intermittently since North and South Yemen unified in 1990. Yemen's weak central government will be even less inclined and less able to assist U.S. efforts to fight AQAP now that Saleh is fighting for his political survival.

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

- *Encourage a peaceful transition of power.* The longer Sanaa remains a cockpit for political violence,

the stronger AQAP is likely to become. Washington should seek to broker a face-saving exit deal for the widely resented Saleh to defuse tensions and enable the formation of another government.

- *Maintain close contacts with Yemen's military leaders.* The backbone of any successor government is likely to be comprised of military or former military leaders. General Mohsen may emerge as the enforcer of any new regime, and he should be approached discreetly to determine whether he has modified his troubling past support for Islamist extremists. There is a possibility that he was acting on behalf of Saleh, his long-time mentor.
- *Engage the opposition.* American diplomats and intelligence officers should discreetly contact and sound out key leaders of political groups and tribes within the loose opposition coalition to ascertain which ones would be potential allies against AQAP and help them to become integral parts of the next government.
- *Coordinate policy with Saudi Arabia.* Riyadh has a strategic interest in Yemeni stability and defeating AQAP, which narrowly missed assassinating the Saudi prince who leads counter-terrorism efforts in a suicide bombing in August 2009. Saudi Arabia wields the strongest foreign influence in Yemen by disbursing subsidies to tribal leaders and financial aid to the government.
- *Prevent Iran from fishing in troubled waters.* There is a growing danger that the chronic Houthi rebellion could become a full-blown proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Houthi tribesmen are Zaidi Shiites who do not share Iran's brand of Shiism, but they remain open to Iranian support in their conflict with the predominantly Sunni Yemeni army and Saudi Arabia. The best solution would be to broker a political settlement that would permanently end the Houthi rebellion, but in the meantime, the U.S. should cooperate with the Saudi and Yemeni governments to contain Iranian influence and intercept any arms shipments.

1. See James Phillips, "Yemen and the Resurgent Al-Qaeda Threat," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2750, January 8, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/01/Yemen-and-the-Resurgent-Al-Qaeda-Threat>.

Time to Engage. Saleh has been a reluctant ally against AQAP, which he perceived to be much less of a threat to his power than a southern secessionist movement or the Houthis rebellion in northern Yemen. If he fights to cling to power, Yemen could dissolve into anarchy, which would greatly benefit AQAP and allow it to function more freely. Washington should work to prevent that from happening by encouraging a peaceful transfer of political power and the establishment of a new government

that could be a long-term partner for counter-terrorism cooperation—or could at least avert the risk that Yemen will become a failed state that AQAP can exploit.

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