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Yemen after Saleh

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On November 23, 2011 Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh arrived unexpectedly in Saudi Arabia, where he signed an agreement whereby he would transfer authority to his vice president in exchange for immunity from prosecution. The United States and Saudi Arabia, the nations that brokered the agreement, hope that Saleh's departure from office would put an end to the "Yemeni revolution," which began in January 2011, inspired by the events of the Arab spring and in response to Yemen's already difficult domestic conditions. The hope is that Saleh's exit will stop the country from deteriorating into a full-scale civil war, but it is doubtful whether this move will result in the hoped-for stability: Yemen is already a failed state, indeed, one of the most dangerous of its kind.

For the 33 years of his rule, Saleh managed to create a complex system of government patronage for the various tribes, helping him maintain effective control of the nation. He understood power relations and maintained a balance of power among the tribes in Yemen though a mix of fear and cooption; consider his memorable description that ruling Yemen is "like dancing on the heads of snakes." In a country where the number of uncontrolled weapons is four times larger than the number of weapons in the hands of the security services, Saleh was clever enough to operate together with the tribal forces in order to maintain his power and confront internal threats, such as the separatist desires of the south and the Shiite Houthi revolt in the north. These tribal leaders who attained stability were awarded many benefits; even the opposition was bought in the same way.

The collapse of "Saleh's order" is liable to damage this fragile fabric and spark armed competition among the tribes for control over the country's dwindling resources. Evidence of such competition already exists, where tribes closely allied with the regime have continued to support Saleh while others have joined the opposition's ranks. In March 2011, General Mahmad Ali Mohsen, commander of the First Armored Corps and Saleh's close ally for the last 30 years, emerged as the opposition leader. The fact that he allegedly

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came out to defend the demonstrators may help him in the elections. But whoever wins the elections will have to deal with a society deeply divided among tribes, religious factions, and armed militias.

The revolution in Yemen, which began as a call for democracy by the young, has turned into a struggle between the existing elites. Political parties and figures allied with the government as well as military commanders who deserted after the turmoil began took charge of the demonstrations and the armed opposition to Saleh's regime. Even in the most optimistic scenario of an orderly transfer of power, the governance of the nation during the transition period will likely be placed in the hands of senior officials of the old regime who will presumably try to prevent, or at least delay, the transition to a democratic form of government. This may spark a new wave of violent resistance should the young people of the revolution stick to their positions and demand a real change, and may even accelerate the deterioration of the poorest and most populated Arab nation in the Arabian Peninsula.

Since the start of the events this year the situation has only grown more acute. Oil exports have all but stopped and the Yemeni economy has sustained losses of up to \$10 billion. About half of Yemen's population already lives on less than \$2 a day. Unemployment has skyrocketed (according to a number of indices it is over 50 percent), while about half of the population is under the age of 16. This reality will complicate any attempt to deal with the social unrest, at least in the foreseeable future. Oil, the nation's only natural resource and the source of most of the income from exports, is dwindling fast: the oil reserves are expected to run dry in the coming decade. Yemen's water sources too are expected to be depleted. The government-by-patronage overly exploited the country's resources, and lacking an alternate plan for economic development, Saleh in recent years relied on financial assistance from Saudi Arabia and the US.

Any alternative government will have to confront a whole host of internal threats to the country's stability. Since the start of the current wave of unrest, the central government has gradually been losing control of many regions, especially in the outlying areas but even in Sana'a itself. In the south, the separatists have taken advantage of the absence of the security forces and are threatening to declare independence. Enjoying Iranian support, the Shiite rebels have also, thanks to the chaos, managed to expand the areas under their control: in practice, they control the entire Sa'dah Governorate as well as extensive areas along the border with Saudi Arabia. One of their goals is to gain access to the Red Sea, ensuring an ongoing weapons supply from Iran via the sea.

At the same time, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has expanded its areas of control; it even managed to wrest control of large parts of the Abyan Governorate, including

Zinjibar, a port city in the Gulf of Aden. The Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda, is, according to the Americans, becoming the most dangerous extension of al-Qaeda's many satellites. The concern is that under the cover of the growing anarchy in Yemen, the organization will continue to carry out deadly attacks and even hamper the freedom of shipping in the Bab El Mandeb Straits, the conduit for more than 3 million barrels of oil every day.

The international effort to confront the instability in Yemen, expected to continue after the transition of the regime, requires attention to Yemen's problems beyond terrorism, which is but a symptom of the nation's many ills. The US has already made it clear that it has no intention of becoming directly involved in another burning Middle East arena and that American activity in Yemen would continue to focus on aerial attacks against al-Qaeda operatives, such as the operation that killed al-Qaeda leader Anwar al-Awlaki on September 30, 2011.

The state that has recently had much involvement in Yemen and even helped the sides arrive at the current agreement is Saudi Arabia, which is interested in ensuring that Yemen's problems do not become its own. The Saudis have much influence in Yemen: over the years, Saudi Arabia established a system of patronage, including generous assistance to the Yemeni government and direct payments to tribal leaders in the country. But Saudi Arabia lacks absolute control of what happens in Yemen, as evidenced by al-Qaeda's attempts in recent years to assassinate members of the Saudi royal family.

Saleh's exit from the arena will raise questions about his few – though not unimportant – achievements. The man who danced so well on the heads of snakes fought al-Qaeda and the Houthis and to a large extent served as the glue that held together the divided Yemeni arena. Yemen's neighbors – chiefly Saudi Arabia – are not interested in the a democracy-minded model in their backyard but are afraid that the situation will spiral out of control and that destitute Yemeni refugees will start pouring over the border. They have therefore promoted a somewhat different model of transfer of power than the one in North Africa; according to this model, Saleh and his cronies will enjoy immunity and his political party will be able to participate in future elections for national leadership.

Saleh's exit, however, is not the end of the matter, if only because the agreement he signed does not respond to most of the demonstrators' demands and because it is still unclear how much his main rivals are truly committed to it. The departure of the fourth Arab leader since the start of the upheavals sweeping the region may help lower the flames but will not resolve Yemen's problems, which are slowly but surely becoming the problems of the Middle East.