

14 March 2013

The Security Council in Yemen: Strong Commitment, Limited Leverage

According to Casey L. Coombs, the United Nations Security Council has provided considerable support for Yemen's political transition. However, a recent upsurge in political violence has exposed the limits of its influence over events in this fractured state.

By Casey L. Coombs for ISN

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), a guardian of Yemen's unsteady path to democracy since the unseating of longtime autocratic leader Ali Abdullah Saleh in late 2011, has recently intensified its efforts to revitalize the country's stalling political transition. An unprecedented visit of the 15-nation body to Sanaa on 27 January 2013 sent a clear message of [support to interim President Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi, who is carrying out a series of reforms](#) outlined in the two-year Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) initiative and culminating in multiparty elections scheduled for February 2014. The Council re-affirmed its support two weeks later, when it adopted a Presidential Statement confirming its readiness to levy [targeted sanctions](#) against recently-ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh and Ali Salim al-Beidh, former leader of the now defunct Socialist South Yemen and current head of a powerful southern secessionist movement, should they continue to undermine Hadi's National Unity Government and the GCC initiative.

Despite these efforts, the two-year transition has fallen still further behind schedule as Yemen's various factions continue to grapple over the logistics and politics of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC). Meanwhile, a spate of bloody clashes between state forces and southern secessionists has exacerbated pent-up regional tensions and anonymous assassination squads continue to pick off government and security officials throughout the country. Taken together, these challenges appear to be exposing the limits of UNSC's influence over a crucial stage in the GCC-guided transition process.

Limits to Diplomacy

Following closed consultations in Sanaa with interim President Hadi, civil society and GCC representatives, British UN Ambassador and Co-Chair of the UNSC delegation Sir Mark Lyall Grant appraised the transition as its midpoint approached. Despite "first year hiccups," the ambassador said, alluding to [armed rebellions](#) against GCC-mandated government and military reforms, [terrorist attacks](#) and postponement of the NDC's mid-November start date, he had received "no indication from interlocutors on delays" to next year's parliamentary and presidential elections. However, "the second year must be strong," he added.

The NDC arguably poses the greatest challenge to holding elections on time and fulfilling the GCC initiative. In under six months participants are expected to convene a truth commission and pass transitional justice laws aimed at settling political grievances rooted in two conflicts that have deeply scarred the population: the 2004 to 2010 wars between the central government and Zaidi Shi'ites in Yemen's northern Sa'ada governorate; and the 1994 civil war in which Ali Abdullah Saleh's Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) crushed an attempt by then-Vice President Ali Salem al-Beidh to pull out of a 1990 unity deal and reestablish the Aden-based People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY). The [reconciliation](#) measures are intended to help shape a new social contract amongst Yemenis, as well as a mutually agreeable roadmap to guide the post-GCC initiative toward a modern democratic civil state.

Parallel negotiations will work toward producing a new governance formula - likely some variant of federalism. If an agreement is reached, the necessary [constitutional changes](#) must pass a popular referendum no later than 90 days before elections. Finally, Yemen's outdated voter registry must be updated to reflect the predominantly remote, rural population of around 25 million. The NDC is currently scheduled to start 18 March.

Palpable Tensions

In February, Yemen commemorated its first peaceful power transfer and the half-way point of the GCC transition. Yet nationwide celebrations and peaceful protests were rocked by a string of incidents in Sanaa and the former PDRY capital, Aden. On 21 February, a year after then-Vice President Hadi won a single-candidate election to replace Saleh, [state forces in Aden shot dead at least two](#) southern secessionist protestors who were allegedly on their way to disrupt a pro-unity celebration of northern-based Islah party members. An eruption of partisan and regional tensions in and around the one-time capital of independent South Yemen prompted Hadi to fly to Aden, marking his first domestic trip outside Sanaa as president. During his tour of the south, Hadi [said in a speech](#) before local authorities, "There are many good powers who want dialogue and there are also people with narrow interests who do not want it, whether those who are inside the country or in Beirut or others [sic]," referring in part to exiled former South Yemeni President al-Beidh, who is [accused of using Iranian support](#) to aid secessionists in southern Yemen.

Six days later, ex-President Saleh attracted tens of thousands of supporters to a rally in Sanaa, his first public appearance in over 18 months, ostensibly in commemoration of his official handover of power at Hadi's inauguration. In a fiery speech at the foot of the self-dedicated "Al-Saleh Mosque" that he built in 2008 for \$60 million, Saleh said his party would contest the country's upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections. "As for the Security Council," he said in reference to the [UNSC sanctions](#) passed two weeks earlier, "they want us to leave the country, alienate us from the chairmanship of the [General People's] Congress party and then they want to alienate us from life."

Spoilers

Throughout the transition, the Security Council has relied heavily on the shuttle diplomacy of Special Envoy Jamal Benomar. His role as an outside mediator helped contain fallout from President Hadi's three rounds of military reforms and has [persuaded key opposition leaders to the negotiating table](#) on numerous occasions. However, recent political unrest amidst ongoing delays to the start of the NDC suggests that both his efforts and the UNSC's may be falling short, and [momentum](#) in favor of potential spoilers may be building.

Nevertheless, even if Special Envoy Benomar and the Security Council do manage to reign in spoilers and spur the NDC to action, other threats that lie beyond the reach of diplomacy are looming large over the transition process, including the [relentless assassination campaign](#) which has killed some 75

Yemeni government officials since the start of 2012. According to Fernando Carvajal, an expert on Yemen from the University of Exeter, “killing squads will continue to destabilize the country and are the primary obstacle to the start of the National Dialogue...Top leaders from all sides fear assassination during the conference or during their stay in Sanaa.”

The UNSC has shown strong commitment and applied unprecedented measures to support Yemen’s transition to democracy. Yet, those efforts remain of limited influence in the face of renewed political turmoil, societal division, spreading regional tensions and potential spoilers. There is still a long way to go before Yemen makes a successful and sustainable political transition.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[The Peril's of Yemen's Cunning State](#)

[Yemen: Enduring Conflicts, Threatened Transition](#)

[Yemen: Between Iran, al-Qaeda, and the West](#)

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Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

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