



Yemen Strategic Exercise Estimates for Scenario 2:

Forceful removal of Saleh and regime loyalists by elements of the Yemeni military (escalation ranging from bloodless coup to civil war).

Current Situation: Country-wide, peaceful, anti-government protests have been met with the repressive use of force by Yemeni security forces. This violence, especially an incident in Sana'a on March 18 when over fifty protestors were killed by snipers, resulted in mass defections from the regime, including leading tribal and military figures on March 21. President Ali Abdullah Saleh made pre-emptive political and economic concessions at the end of January and the beginning of February that met most of the protestors' demands. Saleh's promise to not run for re-election in 2013 was met by skepticism from the opposition because he has announced in previous election cycles that he would not run. Negotiations over a potential transition have stalled and violent crackdowns have continued. Tensions are running high in the capital, where loyalist and defected troops have already fought and violent crackdowns continue. More broadly, the unrest has further weakened the central government's control over at least six governorates.

The estimate focuses on the following key questions:

- Who is most likely to remove Saleh?
- Who is most likely to replace him?
- Who would fight for him?
- Who is most injured by Saleh's removal? How will they react?
- How will the rest of the opposition and other interested parties react?

The estimate also focuses on the following questions:

- How will neighbors react?
- How will al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) react?
- How will other al Qaeda franchises and al Qaeda central react?
- What events are likely to trigger mobilization of the population for significant communal conflict? Along tribal, sectarian, ideological, geographical, or other lines?
- What are the humanitarian risks involved?

The estimate is based on the following assumptions:

- A military commander maintains his troops' loyalty and military assets when he defects.
- The forceful removal of Saleh and regime loyalists will be successful.

Forceful removal of Saleh

The longer that Saleh holds on to power the more likely it is that defected military forces will attempt to remove him by force. In this scenario, a decision point will come when currently defected commanders, and perhaps anxious regime loyalists, opt to protect their own interests by forcing Saleh out of power. This decision point could be triggered by various circumstances: continued brutal crackdowns on protestors, loyalist military troops moving against protestors, stalemated negotiations, Saleh's rejection of an ultimatum to step down, and other events that indicate that an acceptable resolution to the political upheaval will not be achieved. Once a leader with military force decides to remove Saleh from power it may be difficult or impossible to bring the conflict back to the negotiating table.

Saleh's removal could take different shapes ranging from a bloodless coup to what would amount to a civil war. Saleh's removal could entail Saleh's kidnapping, forced exile, or assassination, or the military defeat of Saleh's troops at the hands of the armed opposition. In all of these cases, the most likely initiator is General Ali Mohsen al Ahmar, a defected senior general who commands the northwestern division of the armed forces, which includes Amran, Hajjah, Hudaydah, Mawhit, Sa'ada and Sana'a governorates, and the First Armored Division.

General Ahmar could decide to order the kidnapping, arrest and forced exiled, or assassination of Saleh. The successful execution of this order would present regime loyalists with a choice: to accept a new government or continue to fight for the previous regime. General acceptance of a new government could lead to some negotiated and otherwise peaceful transition. Should loyalists choose to resist transition, it is likely that some form of armed conflict would follow.

One side could decide to launch offensive operations against the other. The offensive action will likely be a planned and coordinated campaign against enemy troops conducted under the auspices of opposition commander General Ahmar or under a loyalist commander, likely either Yahya Saleh who commands the Central Security Forces and counter-terrorism units or Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh who commands the Republican Guard and Yemen's Special Forces.

A large-scale conflict of this variety could also result unintentionally from the escalation of the low-level skirmishes that are already occurring between loyalist forces and oppositionists. In this case, both sides could find themselves catapulted into a military confrontation that they had not ordered or desired. In military parlance such a situation is known as a meeting engagement—small forces begin to fight one another and then start to request reinforcements to deal with tactical threats or disadvantages. If their leaders send reinforcements—or if nearby units simply decide to march to the sound of the guns—then the skirmish can escalate to the level of a significant combat the outcome of which could change the balance of power between the two sides. In that case, leaders on either side could decide that they cannot afford to lose (or believe that they see an opportunity to win) and must instead go all-in, leading

to full-scale conflict for which no one was prepared. This scenario is at once among the most likely and the most dangerous, since it can emerge rapidly and organically from local circumstances and plunge the country into widespread violence according to no one's plan or program.

Shape of an armed conflict

The decision of government troops to remain loyal to Saleh will likely result in armed conflict centered in the capital. General Ahmar's troops have stationed themselves around Sana'a University, the primary site of the protests, and key infrastructure, including sections of the road to the airport, to the north of the capital. Loyalist Republican Guard and Central Security Forces troops are positioned in the south of the capital to protect the presidential palace, and are attempting to prevent further territorial losses to the opposition. The current division of the capital between defected and loyalist troops will likely establish a front line that runs through the center of the city.

Potential defected troop capabilities

Defected General Ahmar is the commander of the northwestern military zone and of the First Armored Division. It is likely that many of the troops under General Ahmar's command remained loyal to him, giving General Ahmar command of a motor rifle brigade as part of the First Armored Division, now headquartered in Sana'a. The headquarters for the northwestern army division hosts an airborne unit, infantry, and air defense systems, all of which may also all fall under General Ahmar's command in Sana'a, though this is unclear. General Mohammed Ali Mohsen, who defected when General Ahmar did, is the commander of the army's eastern military zone, which is headquartered in Aden. General Mohsen commands a motor rifle brigade, but it is not clear where his troops are currently stationed. Precise troop numbers in each army division are unknown.

Potential loyalist troop capabilities

Saleh has relatives throughout the security forces. Saleh's son, General Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, whom Saleh allegedly groomed for succession, commands the Republican Guard and Special Forces. These elite units are already stationed in the capital or have been deployed to the capital in the midst of the unrest. An estimated 6,000 troops serve within the Republican Guard. Saleh's nephew, Colonel Tareq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, commands the Presidential Guards, a unit also known as the Special Guards. A second nephew, Yahya Mohamed Abdullah Saleh, is the commander of the U.S.-trained counter-terrorism units and of Yemen's Central Security Forces. General Mehdi Makwala, who is from the same tribe and village as Saleh, is commander of the southern military zone and swore his allegiance to Saleh when General Ahmar defected.

Yemen's entire army is estimated to number around 60,000 active troops distributed across three major regional divisions. The other significant branch of the security forces is the Central Security Forces, which consists of approximately 50,000 troops, including elite paramilitary units. It is unclear what the contours of an armed conflict would look like after the initial clash in Sana'a. Both commanders' and troops' loyalties to Saleh, as well as how quickly troops stationed in areas far from Sana'a can deploy to the capital, will factor into the shape of the armed conflict. The presence of security forces and military

installations in major cities, and the reactions of the security forces to the protests, may form a basis from which troops' loyalties can be derived. Reports of security forces firing on demonstrators, especially after March 21 when General Ahmar and other commanders defected, indicate continued loyalty to the regime. The depth and extent of these loyalties, however, are unknown due to limited information.

Security forces fired on protestors in the major cities of Sana'a, Taiz, Aden, and Hudaydah, all of which have significant military installations. The commander of the air force base in Hudaydah announced his support for the protestors; however, troops loyal to the regime surrounded the headquarters, indicating continued backing of the regime in the port city. In Lahij, soldiers protested the replacement of their defected commander. Northern cities, whose military installations would fall under the command of General Ahmar, have remained relatively peaceful. Eastern military zone troops, under defected General Mohsen, appear to have defected as well. Defected troops clashed with loyalist Republican Guard troops on two separate occasions in the eastern port city of Mukalla in Hadramawt governorate.

Reactions from internal interests

There is the possibility that internal interest groups will take actions to pursue their own objectives.

Al Houthi Movement

The al Houthis will very likely support the removal of Saleh from power. The group will likely support any military action against the government, but is less likely to participate in the fight itself. Instead, the group may work to solidify its control over local administrations to pursue its own political objectives. This will probably encompass the goal of governing areas that are strongholds to secure future administrative control. Should the conflict in the capital be prolonged, the al Houthis may be drawn into the fight against loyalist forces as clashes expand into their territory. Further, proximity to the capital may lead to a high concentration of internally displaced persons (IDPs) that will strain local al Houthi-run administrations, especially if the fighting spreads.

Southern Movement

There is a possibility that the south will isolate itself from the conflict in the north and that public opinion in the southern governorates will increasingly encourage secession to mitigate the effects of the power struggle in the capital. Factions within the Southern Movement that seek to secede from the north may seize the opportunity of a divided and distracted military to break away from the Yemeni state. Southern leaders will likely vocally support the overthrow of Saleh, but will attempt to prevent the spread of armed conflict into south Yemen. The south has yet to fully recover from the effects of the 1994 civil war, during which General Ahmar served as a key commander for the north. It is unlikely that the major southern cities will become an IDP destination should the country experience prolonged conflict.

Youth Movement

The youth movement, which has defined itself as a peaceful movement, is likely to be sidelined over the course of any type of armed conflict. Much of the momentum originally gained by the youth movement through the support of other opposition groups in Yemen would be lost as those groups turn to address their own self interests. The youth will be unable to shape the development of the anti-government movement once an armed conflict begins, though it is likely that the youth will continue to demand democratic reforms within the government once Saleh is removed from power. It is likely that the youth movement's demands will not be heeded by those in power or by other opposition groups.

Tribes

The tribes may play a significant role in the development of the armed conflict because of their control over territory and resources around Sana'a. Both sides may rely on key lines of communication through tribal-controlled territory and on access to tribal resources. Historically, tribes have erected roadblocks along major transportation routes. Additionally, certain tribes may decide to send militias in support of military units on a particular side of the conflict. The Hashid and the Bakil tribes will likely continue to support the factions fighting for Saleh's removal and may mobilize resources to support General Ahmar's efforts. A prolonged conflict could spread outside of the capital and into the more tribal regions and lead to the tribes' direct involvement in the conflict. Tribes in areas without much central government presence, such as in eastern Yemen, will likely remain unaffected by the conflict, barring the spread of the conflict to their territories.

Impact on security forces

State of security forces

Security forces will be fragmented. Under the best circumstances, loyalist commanders would recognize the change of command and accept Saleh's removal, thereby avoiding widespread conflict. Saleh's relatives may resist calls for reform in the military that would compromise their command. There is the possibility, however, that commanders still loyal to Saleh will resist the attempt to remove him from power. In this situation, the divisions between the military factions will become more clearly defined.

An armed conflict would severely erode infrastructure and weaponry, and result in troop casualties.

State of counter-terrorism operations

Counter-terrorism operations will be severely affected should a forceful removal of the regime lead to prolonged conflict. Even in the best case, the upheaval caused by defections within the military would affect the resumption of limited counter-terrorism operations. The commanders of Yemen's counter-terrorism units are directly related to Saleh, and it is likely that they will hesitate before accepting a change in command. There is also a chance that the loyalty of Saleh's relatives to a new government would be questioned, and their replacement might therefore be sought. The loss of continuity in command will result in the loss of institutional knowledge for the counter-terrorism units.

Both Saudi Arabia and the U.S. have the military capabilities to take targeted action against AQAP should intelligence come to light that an attack was imminent, but outside of an immediate threat, neither is likely to take unilateral action in Yemen.

Reactions from al Qaeda and affiliates

Any form of armed conflict within Yemen's military will very likely benefit AQAP. The unrest would serve to distract internal security forces from pursuing AQAP and will further increase AQAP's operating space. The group will likely seek to consolidate control in its safe havens and will likely take control of the ongoing upheaval in Yemen. Freedom of movement will increase for al Qaeda operatives within the country. AQAP may seek to take over military installations outside the center of the fight—Sana'a—that will not be as strongly defended with the deployment of troops to the capital. AQAP may also seek to execute a spectacular attack against the West, especially if Saudi Arabia and the U.S. hesitate to target the group and limit direct involvement.

General Ahmar has historical connections to al Qaeda. He reportedly helped train and command the "Afghan Arabs," former Soviet-Afghan war *mujahideen* who assassinated southern leaders in the early 1990s and may have financed al Qaeda operatives. General Ahmar also has a documented relationship with U.S.-designated terrorist Sheikh Abdul Majid al Zindani and he is married to former *mujahid* Tariq al Fadhli's sister. Al Islah (Reform) party, of which General Ahmar is a member, is associated with Islamists in Yemen.

There is the possibility that General Ahmar might reach out to AQAP for assistance, particularly if the defected forces remain outnumbered by loyalists. General Ahmar may encourage AQAP to employ insurgent and terrorist tactics in exchange for sheltering AQAP militants and increasing the role of *shari'a* in any future government. He might also use past connections to former *mujahideen* to seek increased military support in Yemen from other al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen.

International reactions

It is unlikely that international actors will initially deploy troops to Yemen.

U.S. and Western allies

The U.S. and other Western allies will likely call for a quick resolution to any armed conflict in Yemen. The resulting de facto suspension of counter-terrorism operations will be one of the U.S.'s main concerns, in addition to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. It is unlikely that the U.S. will resume the provision of military assistance to the government of Yemen or will militarily support the opposition forces. The most immediate form of Western involvement would include the provision of emergency humanitarian assistance through international aid organizations.

Saudi Arabia and GCC

Saudi Arabia will very likely deploy troops into its southern Jizan province in order to reinforce the border with Yemen and prevent the infiltration of al Qaeda operatives into Saudi Arabia. The country's

primary concern will be to contain the Yemeni conflict within Yemeni borders, including preventing a mass refugee movement into Saudi Arabia. It is unlikely that Saudi troops will participate in the Yemeni conflict directly, especially given the country's current troop deployment to Bahrain. No other GCC countries are likely to be militarily involved in the conflict; however, the GCC may take steps to address a developing humanitarian crisis that will likely be exacerbated by Saudi's closure of Yemen's northern border.

Iran

The Iranian regime might seek to gain a foothold in Yemen through the al Houthis, though it is unlikely that the al Houthis would acquiesce to any demands in return for material support. Iran has given the al Houthis limited assistance in the past.

Prospects for success

Following the removal of Saleh and the consolidation of control over the government, General Ahmar will likely seek to establish an interim civilian government in Yemen, but will continue to hold the real power in the country. The general's position following the removal of Saleh will enable him to redistribute power in a fashion beneficial to himself, likely empowering fellow Hashid tribe and Islah party members. Islah party member Hamid al Ahmar, a wealthy businessman from the Hashid tribe and an ally of General Ahmar, will likely run the government with General Ahmar. Other Islah party members, including Mohammed Qahtan and Islamists like Sheikh Zindani, will likely gain political influence.

It is likely that the new government will seek to strengthen the security forces, especially the internal security forces, because of the state fragmentation that is likely to have occurred during an armed conflict. It is unclear, however, whether a new government and a reformed security apparatus would be strong enough to reunify a fragmented state. Prolonged armed conflict would have further reduced the role of a central government in most governorates and the growth of local governance systems will likely present a challenge.

General Ahmar's historical ties to Salafist Islamists—and the new government's potential sympathies to al Qaeda—are of concern to the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and other potential targets of al Qaeda attacks.

The following events may alter the shape of the conflict:

- International intervention in the face of a humanitarian crisis or AQAP attack on West traced back to Yemen.
- General Ahmar is unable to command troops.

The following events may destabilize the interim government:

- State fragmentation or inability to unify under new government.
- Restart of mass demonstrations against the new government.