

The GCC Plan for Yemen: Still Crazy after All These Months

Written by J. Dana Stuster

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J. DANA STUSTER, JUL 8 2011

On April 25, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) proposed a settlement to resolve the political crisis in Yemen.[1] In the weeks that followed, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to sign the deal on no fewer than three occasions, only to back out at the last instant by insisting on new conditions. The most recent time that he did this, on May 22, he did so while surrounded by the Secretary General of the GCC and ambassadors from the United States, Europe, and the Gulf states, who attended what was supposed to be a signing ceremony after being evacuated from the United Arab Emirates embassy, which had been surrounded by armed pro-government thugs.[2]

After Saleh refused to sign on May 22, the GCC supposedly withdrew the deal. This is a welcome development for the following reasons: The GCC deal is poorly conceived, impossible to execute, and would settle precisely nothing.

The agreement would initiate a three-step process:

1. Upon signing, a new legislature would be created to balance the interests of the protesters. In the new legislature, Saleh's political party, the General People's Congress (GPC) would retain 50% of the seats. The coalition of opposition parties, which include the Islamist party, *Islah*, the Yemen Socialist Party, and several others with token representation in the existing parliament, collectively called the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), would hold 40% of the seats. The remaining 10% would be apportioned to unspecified others; these would likely go to the military and possibly a couple seats would be given as consolation to the youth protesters.
2. Within thirty days of the formation of the new legislature, Saleh would tender his resignation. In exchange for his cooperation, the legislature would pass immunity for Saleh, his relatives, and senior officials in his government.
3. Sixty days after Saleh's resignation, new elections would be held.

The process would likely never get past Step One. As Brian Whitaker noted in early May, one of Saleh's conditions was that all protests would cease before he submitted his resignation at the end of the first month of the agreement.[3] This was never going to happen. While the JMP was eager to sign the GCC deal, it never had the support of the movement's politically unaffiliated base, many of whom see the JMP as part of the political establishment they oppose. In protest camps, the JMP and their supporters have been ostracized and pushed to the outskirts of the tent cities.[4] The youth movement, meanwhile, has always held that Saleh and his family should be tried, and vowed to protest until Saleh resigns. If Saleh signed, he could have justified a brutal crackdown on the protesters saying that they stood in the way of progress and the implementation of the agreement.

The GCC deal was poised to collapse again after the initial thirty-day period, when Saleh was to resign. Under the Yemeni constitution, the president's resignation must be accepted by an absolute majority of the parliament. If only one of the 10% of unassigned seats was allocated to a Saleh supporter, the GPC would have the 50%+1 necessary to retain the president. What's more, the GPC even announced that they would.[5] Such an action would torpedo the GCC's framework for reconciliation and wouldn't end the protests. It would leave Yemen split by the same political crisis, while allowing Yemen's security and economy to continue to deteriorate. The GCC deal was never a way to

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realize a revolution in Yemen; it was a way to stifle it.

When Saleh rejected the agreement on May 22, it was supposed to be withdrawn from consideration. The GCC had said as much in the days before May 22, and though White House counterterrorism advisor John Brennan made a harried trip to the UAE to try to revive the agreement, events in Sanaa moved too quickly.[6] A series of street battles began between Saleh and the remaining loyalist elements of his military, commanded by his sons and nephew, and tribal forces under the leadership of the Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar, the leader of the Hashid Tribal Federation, the most powerful tribal group in the country. About this time, I asked a Pentagon official about the GCC agreement. "I think we've moved a bit beyond that," he told me. After two weeks, Saleh was injured by a bomb that was detonated in his private mosque, and he was forced to seek treatment in Saudi Arabia, where he has remained for the past month.

In Saleh's absence, his vice president, Abd Rabu Mansur Hadi, is designated to act in his stead. Hadi has tried to do so, while circumscribed by Saleh's son Ahmed, the commander of the Republican Guard, who has refused to leave the presidential palace. The tribal forces abide by a tense ceasefire, the protesters remain in the streets; everyone seems to be waiting for the next move. The GCC deal seemed to be gathering dust on a shelf somewhere, where it belongs.

The deal was dead until two weeks ago, when the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey Feltman, met with Vice President Hadi and urged Yemeni officials to revisit the GCC agreement.[7] John Brennan resuscitated it again while announcing the Obama administration's new counterterrorism strategy. Asked about the situation in Yemen, Brennan said, "Our position, still, from the political standpoint, is that the GCC initiative is the best path forward to resolve Yemen's political crisis." [8] In the past week, three separate plans have been discussed in the media, and once again the GCC agreement was among them. Reuters reported a Yemeni cabinet official saying that Saleh supported the GCC deal, but that Saleh would have to return to Yemen to oversee the implementation of the agreement.[9] Yemeni Vice President Hadi offered his proposal to the opposition yesterday. Though details aren't public, an opposition figure familiar with the agreement told Reuters that it is a variation on the GCC deal which would extend the period before elections, and that during the interim period Saleh would transfer only some responsibilities to the vice president.[10] Meanwhile, the Joint Meeting Parties are working to form a transitional government without consultation with Saleh and the current regime.[11]

The political landscape in Yemen right now is a mess. Jeb Boone, a special correspondent for the Washington Post in Sanaa, posted on his blog a survey of recent contradictory headlines: "Yemen's Saleh not returning soon; Burned Saleh set to the return as unrest continues; Yemen power transfer ruled out; Saleh to hand over power to transition council," etc. "In short," Boone concludes, "no one knows what the hell is happening in Yemen or in Saleh's hospital bed." [12] Despite the vacuum of information, this much is known: the GCC initiative will not solve the crisis, only complicate and prolong it. The United States' dogged persistence in supporting it adds dangerous legitimacy to the agreement and the failing Saleh regime. A reevaluation of U.S. policy in Yemen is long overdue and needs to start now with a pragmatic approach to the future of Yemen and U.S.-Yemeni relations.

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[2] Robert F. Worth, "Yemeni Leader's Allies Blockade Embassy as He Refuses Peace Deal," *New York Times* (22 May 2011): <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/23/world/middleeast/23yemen.html>

[3] Brian Whitaker, "Yemen 'transition' deal is a non-starter," *Al-Bab* (2 May 2011): http://www.al-bab.com/blog/2011/blog1105a.htm#yemen_transition_deal_is_a_non-starter

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