

President of Yemen flees to Saudi Arabia

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President Ali Abdullah Saleh fled Yemen Sunday morning and took refuge in a military hospital in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, apparently ending 33 years of authoritarian rule. He was accompanied by a half dozen top government officials, all of them reportedly injured in the same explosion Friday at a mosque in the presidential compound in Sanaa, the Yemeni capital.

Joining Saleh in what appears to be long-term exile were a reported 31 members of his extended family. However, his son Ahmed and several nephews, who head the elite military special forces and the intelligence services, remained behind in Yemen, still clinging to the reins of power.

The country's vice president, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi, took over as acting head of state. His first meeting—even before talks with the Yemeni military and Saleh's son and nephews—was with the US ambassador to Yemen, Gerald Feierstein, who thus appears to be the de facto decision-maker in Sanaa.

Saleh has not formally resigned, a step that under the Yemeni constitution would require a new presidential election within 60 days. But tens of thousands of Yemenis flocked to Change Square in Sanaa, outside Sanaa University, and to other protest sites throughout the country, to celebrate his departure.

Saleh is the third long-time Arab ruler to be ousted since the mass movement in the Middle East and North Africa first erupted in Tunisia. He joins former Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, also in exile in Saudi Arabia, and former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, now jailed in a military hospital in the resort of Sharm el-Sheik.

The circumstances surrounding Saleh's removal from Yemen are murky and capable of multiple interpretations. The official Yemeni government account is that tribal militia forces controlled by the family of Sadiq al-Ahmar, head of the Hashed tribe, the

country's largest, fired rockets into the presidential compound during prayers Friday, killing 11 members of Saleh's bodyguard and wounding most of the top government officials, including Saleh, Prime Minister Ali Mohammed Mujawar, a deputy prime minister, the governor of Sanaa, and the top leaders of the country's stooge parliament.

The Western media has largely echoed this account, differing only on whether a rocket or a mortar shell inflicted the damage. An account by McClatchy News Service, however, notes the contradictions in the official story. The report reads:

“Saleh was injured Friday along with numerous senior officials in an explosion that occurred at the Yemeni presidential compound's mosque. The cause of the explosion remains unknown. Yemeni officials originally laid blame for the attack on forces loyal to the powerful Ahmar family.

“The Ahmar family, however, denied culpability. Some have argued that the attack on the presidential compound was an inside job. Saleh's compound, widely considered to be the most secure building in the capital, lies in the south of the city, far from the northern neighborhood of Hasaba where clashes have been concentrated.”

This reading of events suggests several other possibilities, including an internal coup attempt from within the Yemeni military, perhaps abetted or directed by Saudi Arabia, which has turned openly against the Saleh government in the wake of Saleh's refusal on three occasions to follow through on agreements to step down, negotiated by the Saudi-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council.

Moreover, American authorship of the attack on Saleh's compound can certainly not be ruled out. The CIA has fired missiles from Predator drones at numerous targets in Yemen, most recently at the location where the agency believed it would hit Anwar

al-Awlaki, the US citizen who has been linked to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Al Qaeda affiliate active in Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

The description of the attack on the mosque in Saleh's presidential compound—a sudden explosion, coming seemingly from nowhere, on a target that, as McClatchy points out, was “widely considered to be the most secure building in the capital,” relatively far from the war zone—is perfectly compatible with a Predator strike.

And Saleh was certainly a potential target for removal from power by his former sponsors in the United States, who regarded his stubborn refusal to leave office as an obstacle to their political and diplomatic maneuvers to contain the political movement in Yemen and prevent it from developing into a revolutionary explosion that could spread throughout the oil-rich Arabian peninsula.

If this was an American “operation,” the decisive role was likely played by John O. Brennan, chief White House adviser on counterterrorism, who traveled to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates this week to discuss the crisis in Yemen. Brennan had been scheduled to return to the US Friday, but delayed his return after the explosion that injured Saleh. He spoke directly with Vice President al-Hadi Saturday, according to a report by the *Wall Street Journal*.

Brennan spent 25 years in the CIA, mainly in the Middle East, including the position of the station chief in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, before becoming chief of staff to CIA Director George Tenet and then director of the National Counterterrorism Center. He was Obama's initial choice to head the CIA but withdrew rather than face questioning over his record of support for CIA rendition and torture of terrorism “suspects.” Obama then placed him in a White House post that did not require Senate confirmation.

Whatever the provenance of Friday's attack on the presidential compound, Saleh's departure did not end the violence in Yemen. A Saudi-brokered ceasefire between pro-Saleh forces and the al-Ahmars lasted for only a few hours Saturday, before gunfire and artillery exchanges resumed in the northern part of the capital city. A bomb exploded at the headquarters of the Yemeni 1st armored division in Sanaa, killed two and injuring 15.

Pro-Saleh units withdrew from Taiz, a large city in

Yemen's central highlands where the security forces massacred dozens of unarmed protesters May 31. Press accounts said that armed tribal militiamen had entered the city, and that tanks and uniformed soldiers had been pulled out Saturday. Dozens of gunmen then attacked a presidential palace in Taiz Sunday, the Associated Press reported, killing four soldiers.

The AP also reported the ambush of a military convoy in southern Yemen, with the deaths of nine soldiers. Also, anti-government fighters attacked an army checkpoint in the southern city of Aden. After the news of Saleh's departure reached that city—the former capital of independent South Yemen—military forces were pulled back from positions there.

The US military is closely monitoring the activities of Yemeni military forces, particularly the elite counterterrorism units that have received the bulk of the \$200 million in equipment and training from the Pentagon over the past four years. According to a Pentagon spokesman, Col. David Lapan, US military trainers remain embedded with these Yemeni units but were taking “necessary precautions.” He claimed there was “no evidence that any of the counterterrorism forces we've trained have been [deployed] against unarmed protesters.”

In a statement cited by the *Washington Post*, the Pentagon spokesman appeared to acknowledge that Saleh's ouster was an accomplished fact, reiterating, “Our shared interest with the Yemeni government in defeating Al Qaeda goes beyond one person.”



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