

Imperialist powers step up intervention in Yemen

Niall Green
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As fighting between pro- and anti-government forces continues in Yemen, the major powers are maneuvering to secure their interests in the strategically vital country.

Since mass protests broke out in January against the rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, an estimated 400 people have died in clashes between state security forces and groups opposed to the regime. Most of those killed have been civilian protesters gunned down by Saleh security forces in the capital, Sanaa, and other cities.

After decades of backing Saleh's authoritarian regime, Washington has moved against their former ally in an effort to maintain US authority in the region and prevent the spread of unrest to neighboring Saudi Arabia.

Speaking to the press last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that she did not "expect this conflict to end unless President Saleh and his government move out of the way to permit the opposition and civil society to begin a transition to political and economic reform."

Two days after Clinton made this statement, President Saleh fled Yemen, suffering from injuries sustained in an explosion at his official compound. Saleh, aged 69, reportedly suffered 40 percent burns and serious head injuries. Several senior government officials and bodyguards were also killed or injured in the attack, the exact circumstances of which remain uncertain.

Saleh is receiving medical care in neighboring Saudi Arabia. It is believed that over 30 members of his family have fled the country with him. Saleh has still not formally resigned his office, however, and has only temporarily handed power to his long-term vice president, Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi.

While tribal militias were initially accused of firing a

rocket into the presidential compound in Sanaa, the main tribal leader, Sheikh Hameed al-Ahmar, has denied responsibility. According to the Associated Press news agency, two unnamed US officials have claimed the explosion was caused by a bomb planted inside the compound and timed to go off when Saleh and his top officials were nearby.

Such a carefully coordinated assassination attempt in the heart of the government's headquarters points to the involvement of one or more intelligence or military agency, either Yemeni or foreign.

Clinton's comments and the source of the information given to Associated Press about the bomb raise the obvious question of whether the US had a hand in the attack. It would be quite within the means and modus operandi of the Pentagon or the CIA to either directly plant such a bomb or sponsor a section of the Yemeni state to do so.

Robert Powell, Yemen analyst for the *Economist*, commented that the president's departure from Yemen was "probably permanent."

"The Saudis, as well as the US and European Union, are pushing hard for him to stay in Saudi Arabia, as they view the prospect of his return as a catastrophe," Powell stated.

The ouster of Saleh has not brought any resolution to the conflict in Yemen, which increasingly resembles a full-scale civil war. The remnants of the government, including some of Saleh's family members, maintain control of key buildings in the center of Sanaa, and retain the loyalty of elite Republican Guard troops, the secret police and other sections of the security apparatus.

Meanwhile, tribal militiamen control much of Sanaa, especially the north of the city. In addition, thousands of students and working class youth continue to mount

protests near Sanaa University as well as in other cities.

On Tuesday, 30 people were killed in heavy fighting in the southern city of Zinjibar. The regime in Sanaa has blamed the violence there on Al Qaeda. However, Zinjibar and the nearby city of Aden have been centers of opposition to Saleh's rule for many years, and there is a popular secessionist movement in the south of the country.

Yemen's second largest city, Taiz, has also seen heavy fighting between pro- and anti-government forces. The AFP news agency reported Tuesday that tribal groups opposed to the government are now in control of the city. One tribal leader, Sheikh Hammoud Saeed al-Mikhlaifi, told AFP that his militiamen held major buildings in Taiz. "We, the tribes, in support to the oppressed and in retaliation against the illegitimate government ...have deployed around government installations," al-Mikhlaifi said.

Afraid that the remnants of the Saleh regime cannot contain the growing civil conflict, the Obama administration issued its clearest call for Saleh to resign in favor of a coalition government. Speaking at a press conference in Washington on Monday, Secretary Clinton pressed Saleh to formally resign in order to begin a "peaceful and orderly transition" of power.

The US ambassador to Yemen, Gerald Feierstein, has been in talks with bourgeois opposition parties in Yemen for months, in the hope that they will join a "national unity" coalition aimed at winding down the mass protests and securing the interests of the imperialist powers and the local elites.

Washington's belated demand for Saleh to resign has nothing to do with the democratic or social rights of the Yemeni people. Washington has backed the dictator since 1978, when Saleh came to power in what was then North Yemen—a US-backed client state in the Cold War.

Throughout the months of mass protests in Yemen that began early this year, the Obama administration only voiced the most muted calls for the Saleh regime to show "restraint" and respect for "universal rights." It is only Saleh's inability to successfully quell the mass protests, followed by his stubborn refusal to leave office, that has caused Riyadh and Washington to move against him.

With its main regional ally, Saudi Arabia, Washington seeks to impose a political settlement on

Yemen that would see Saleh leave office with immunity from prosecution and his family's wealth intact, while maintaining an essentially similar pro-US regime in Sanaa.

The Yemeni government's loss of effective control over much of the country is of profound concern to the United States, as it threatens US domination over the oil-rich region. The mass protests in Yemen, which have seen hundreds of thousands, mainly young workers and students, take to the streets to demand jobs and social rights, as well as an end to Saleh's authoritarian rule, could spread to Saudi Arabia.

The despotic Saudi monarchy rules over a social powder keg, monopolizing the vast oil wealth of the country while millions of young people are faced with a lack of jobs, housing, and a complete absence of elementary democratic rights. Riyadh is also fearful that various tribal disputes in Yemen could spill across the long and porous border into Saudi Arabia, threatening to stoke tribal and sectarian divisions in the kingdom.

In addition to the machinations of the US and Saudi Arabia, Britain, the former colonial power in southern Yemen, has moved its military forces to the area, ready to deploy on the pretext of evacuating British citizens.

Around 80 Royal Marine commandos are on board a ship moored off Yemen, and a landing vessel is expected to rendezvous with them soon.

A Royal Navy source told the media that the ships could evacuate up to 500 people. However, the UK Foreign Office has already advised all Britons to leave Yemen, and the number of British nationals still in the country is believed to be far lower.



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