

# Tensions escalate as Yemen's president returns

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President Ali Abdullah Saleh returned to Yemen yesterday, ignoring pressure by the US and other major powers to remain in Saudi Arabia, where he had been convalescing after an attempt on his life in June. His arrival will only inflame the conflict between his regime and opposition protesters.

Saleh had initially announced that he would return to Yemen in mid-August, but backed off after Washington warned against such a step. The Obama administration has been pressing Saleh to accept a plan formulated by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for the president to step down to make way for a transitional administration composed of government and opposition politicians. Saleh had indicated on three occasions that he would agree to the plan, only to subsequently renege.

Saleh's return to the Yemeni capital of Sana'a by private plane apparently took the US by surprise. US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland yesterday simply reiterated the call for Saleh to implement the GCC proposal. "Whether Saleh is in or out of the country, it's important for him to sign the accord and move on," she said.

The US has backed the autocrat Saleh since he came to power in 1978 and only reluctantly agreed to his removal after months of large anti-government protests. Washington's objective is to refashion the regime in Sana'a, with the assistance of the bourgeois opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), to continue to serve American economic and strategic interests in Yemen and the region.

Some analysts speculated that Saudi Arabia allowed

Saleh to return. "If there wasn't anything for them, they wouldn't have let him go," Ghanem Nuseibeh, a consultant with London-based Cornerstone Global, told Reuters. CBS reported that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was not warned of Saleh's imminent return when she spoke with the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal in New York earlier this week.

While it is a close ally of Washington, the Saudi regime has its own interests in neighbouring Yemen. It has helped to prop up Saleh in order to suppress the local affiliate of Al Qaeda and also Shiite rebels in northern Yemen on the border with Saudi Arabia. The Saudi elite is also deeply concerned that the prolonged protests in Yemen will spill over the border and ignite opposition protest to its own autocratic rule.

On his return, Saleh called for a truce in the fighting between government and opposition forces in Sana'a over the past week and offered talks with opposition parties. But he gave no indication that he was prepared to resign—the main demand of the opposition demonstrations since anti-government protests began in February.

Despite Saleh's refusal to step down, the JMP has welcomed his return and is likely to take up his offer of talks. Opposition leader Mohammed al-Mutawakil told Reuters: "I am optimistic about his return, maybe it will be to bring the situation into check and sign the Gulf initiative... I do not think this is an escalation."

However, anti-government protesters do not believe Saleh's declaration that he has returned "carrying the dove of peace and an olive branch, not holding any grudges or hatred towards anyone." His regime is

notorious for ruthlessly suppressing any political opposition. Protest leader Abdel Hadi al-Azizi told Associated Press: “His return means more divisions, more escalation and confrontations. We are in a very critical escalation.”

Tens of thousands of people took part in anti-government protests on Friday in Sana’a and the city of Taiz. Some reports indicate that the demonstrations in the capital were smaller than usual, due to fears that snipers would continue to target protesters. The demonstrators chanted, “Saleh came back to be prosecuted for his massacres.” A separate rally in support of Saleh was held in another part of the capital.

Security forces continue to exchange fire with armed tribesmen in the northern Hasaba district of the capital, as well as with opposition troops supporting protesters further south. The anti-Saleh troops, estimated at 20,000, are commanded by General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, who defected from the regime in March. At least three bystanders have been killed by shelling aimed at Mohsen’s headquarters in “Change Square.”

The government has been cracking down on protesters since last Sunday, when an estimated 100,000 people marched toward the centre of Sana’a, calling for the government’s removal. Government troops opened fire on the demonstrators, leading to clashes between pro- and anti-government forces. A truce agreed late on Tuesday had little effect, with further deaths on Wednesday and Thursday. An estimated 100 people have been killed this week.

Yassar, a hotel cleaner, told Reuters: “I can’t believe he came back. He shouldn’t have come back. Us regular people, we are so sick of all of them: the opposition and the government. Can’t they see they’re going to ruin this country?”

Despite their differences, the Saleh regime and opposition JMP both fear that the ongoing protests will develop into a broad social movement that could threaten bourgeois rule. Yemen is the poorest and most economically backward country in the Middle East, with two out of three people living on less than \$2 per day.

Writing in the *Guardian* yesterday, *Yemen Post* editor Hakim Almasmari commented: “The arrival of the presidential jet has sharply escalated Yemen’s interminable problems. The security forces are fracturing daily and resentment continues to grow on the country’s seething streets, where homes have an hour of electricity each day and food prices have risen around 400 percent in seven months. Yemen is a ticking time bomb. And Saleh’s return has just shortened the fuse.”



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