A crisis in Yemen is rapidly escalating. A standoff centered on the presidential palace is taking place between security forces in the capital city of Sanaa while embattled President Ali Abdullah Saleh continues to resist stepping down, claiming that the "majority of Yemeni people" support him. While a Western-led military intervention in Libya is dominating the headlines, the crisis in Yemen and its implications for Persian Gulf stability is of greater strategic consequence. Saudi Arabia is already facing the threat of an Iranian destabilization campaign in eastern Arabia and has deployed forces to Bahrain in an effort to prevent Shiite unrest from spreading. With a second front now threatening the Saudi underbelly, the situation in Yemen is becoming one that the Saudis can no longer leave on the backburner.

The turning point in Yemen occurred March 18 after Friday prayers, when tens of thousands of protesters in the streets calling for Saleh's ouster came under a heavy crackdown that reportedly left some 46 people dead and hundreds wounded. It is unclear whether the shootings were ordered by Saleh himself, orchestrated by a member of the Yemeni defense establishment to facilitate Saleh's political exit or simply provoked by tensions in the streets, but it does not really matter. Scores of defections from the ruling party, the prominent Hashid tribe in the north and military old guard followed the March 18 events, both putting Saleh at risk of being removed in a coup and putting the already deeply fractious country at risk of a civil war.

The Army Splits

But the situation in Yemen is also not a replica of the crisis in Egypt, which was not so much a revolution as it was a very carefully managed succession by the country's armed forces. In Egypt, the armed forces maintained their independence from the unpopular Mubarak regime, thereby providing the armed forces with the unity in command and effort in using the street demonstrations to quietly oust Mubarak. In Yemen, a tribal society at its core, Saleh insured himself by stacking the security apparatus with members of his family and Sanhan tribal village. For example:

* Gen. Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, the president's son, is the commander of the Republican Guard and Yemeni special operations forces. The president originally had planned to have his son succeed him.
* Gen. Yahya Mohamed Abdullah Saleh, commander of the Central Security Forces and Counterterrorism Unit, is Saleh's nephew.
* Col. Tareq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, commander of the Presidential Guard, is Saleh's nephew.
* Col. Ammar Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, commander of the National Security Bureau, is Saleh's nephew.
* Brig. Gen. Mohamed Saleh al-Ahmar, commander of the air force, is Saleh's half-brother.
* Brig. Gen. Ali Saleh al-Ahmar, chief of staff of the general command, is Saleh's half-brother.
* Brig. Gen. Mehdi Makwala, commander of the southern military zone in Aden, is a Hashid tribesman from Saleh's village, Sanhan.

* Brig. Gen. Mohammed Ali Mohsen, commander of the Eastern Military Zone in Hadramawt, is a Hashid tribesman from Sanhan.

However, Saleh cannot rely on the support of all of his relatives. The biggest threat to Saleh within the military apparatus comes from Brig. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, Saleh's half brother, commander of the first armored brigade and commander of the northwestern military zone. Mohsen is an influential member of Yemen's old guard and initiated a fresh wave of defections when he announced March 21 that he is joining the people's revolution and deployed an armored formation to protect the protesters. Armored vehicles under Mohsen's command are now reportedly surrounding the presidential palace, where Republican Guard units under the command of Saleh's son, Ahmed, have already taken up defensive positions. The potential for clashes between pro and now anti-Saleh security forces is escalating.

Ali Mohsen may be positioning himself for Saleh's political exit, but he is unlikely to be a welcome replacement from the U.S. point of view. Ali Mohsen is considered a veteran of the Islamist old guard, who earned its claim to fame during the 1994 civil war, when Saleh relied on Islamists to defeat the more secular and formerly Marxist south. The infusion of jihadists and jihadist sympathizers throughout the Yemeni security apparatus — a critical factor that has compounded counterterrorism efforts in the country — is a product of the Ali Mohsen legacy.

Following Mohsen's defection and a crisis meeting among senior Yemen defense officials March 21, Yemeni Defense Minister Maj. Gen. Mohammad Nasser Ali asserted that the army would continue to stand behind Saleh and thwart any attempted coups threatening Saleh's legitimacy. The Yemeni defense minister does not speak for the entire army, however, particularly those forces under the command of Mohsen deploying in the capital city.

Tribal Opportunism

If the army is the first pillar underpinning Saleh's regime, the second pillar is the tribe. Yemen, much like Libya, is divided along tribal lines, particularly in the north of the country. Though Saleh understands the power of the tribe and has made a concerted effort to maintain his tribal alliances, his biggest threat within Yemen's tribal landscape comes from Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar, one of the sons to the late Abdullah bin Hussein al-Ahmar, who ruled the Hashid confederation as the most powerful tribal chieftain in the country. Hamid is a wealthy businessman and a leader of the conservative Islah party that leads the Joint Meetings Party (JMP) opposition coalition. He has obvious political aspirations to become the next leader of Yemen and sees the current uprising as his chance to bring Saleh down. In fact, the first wave of resignations from within the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party could be traced back to the al-Ahmar family tree, as relatives and allies were called on to raise the pressure against Saleh.

Still, there are significant arrestors to Hamid's political rise. The al-Ahmars, while powerful and wealthy, do not speak for the entire Hashid confederation. Many members of both the Hashid and Bakil tribes have said as much publicly. Tribal sheikhs within the Bakil are especially wary of seeing an archrival Hashid leader assume control of Sanaa. In short, Saleh and his remaining loyalists still have some room to maneuver in playing tribal loyalties off each other to preserve

his regime, but that room is narrowing.

The Saudi Vote

Yemeni Foreign Minister Abu-Bakr al-Qirbi is reportedly en route to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to deliver a "Presidential Letter" to the Saudi Monarch. In this letter, Saleh is likely asking for Saudi support for his regime, making the case that his downfall will lead to a fracturing of the country and greater instability for the Arabian Peninsula overall. Saudi support for Saleh is nowhere near assured, however.

Yemen has long had to contend with the fact that Saudi Arabia has the money, influence and tribal links to directly shape Yemeni politics according to its interests. The Saudis view Yemen as a subordinate power on the heel of the Arabian Peninsula, one that (if partitioned in a civil war) could potentially provide Riyadh with direct access to the Arabian Sea, but that if left to fragment, could also spread instability into the Saudi kingdom. The Saudis have thus relied primarily on their tribal links in the country to maintain influence and keep a lid on unrest, thereby keeping the central government in Sanaa weak and dependent on Riyadh for most of its policies.

Given Saudi Arabia's heavy influence in Yemen, the Saudi view on the situation in Yemen serves as a vital indicator of Saleh's staying power. More specifically, defections or pledges of support by Yemeni tribal leaders on the Saudi payroll can provide clues on the current Saudi mood toward Yemen. The al-Ahmar family, for example, has extremely close ties to the Saudi royals, and Hamid al-Ahmar has made a point in his recent interviews to praise the Saudis and highlight that he has been traveling between Saudi Arabia and Yemen in recent weeks. At the same time, a number of other prominent tribes close to the Saudis continue to stand by Saleh. Throughout much of Yemen's crisis, the Saudis did not show signs of abandoning Saleh, but they were not fully backing him, either.

This is likely a reflection of internal Saudi differences as well as limited Saudi resources to deal effectively with Yemen at this point in time. The three Saudi royals who deal most closely with Yemen affairs are King Abdullah, Crown Prince Sultan and Interior Minister and Second Deputy Prime Minister Prince Naif. Prince Naif and Crown Prince Sultan have had a very rocky relationship with Saleh and would most likely be amenable to his ouster, while King Abdullah (whose clan rivals the Sudeiri clan, to which Crown Prince Sultan and Prince Naif both belong) has maintained a closer relationship with the Yemeni president. The three often disagree on various facets of Saudi Arabia's policy toward Yemen. At the same time, the Saudi government has its hands full in dealing with Iran, preventing it from devoting considerable attention to Yemen's political crisis. Using Bahrain as a flashpoint for sectarian unrest, Iran has been fueling a destabilization campaign throughout eastern Arabia designed to undermine its U.S.-allied Sunni Arab rivals.

Yemen, while ranking much lower on a strategic level than Bahrain, Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, also is not immune to Iran's agenda. In the northern Yemeni province of Saada, the Yemeni state has struggled to suppress a rebellion by al-Houthis of the Zaydi sect, considered an offshoot of Shiite Islam and heretical by Wahhabi standards. Riyadh fears al-Houthi unrest in

Yemen's north will stir unrest in Saudi Arabia's southern provinces of Najran and Jizan, which are home to the Ismailis (also an offshoot of Shiite Islam). Ismaili unrest in the south could then embolden Shia in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province, who have already been carrying out demonstrations against the Saudi monarchy with Iranian backing.

When Saudi Arabia deployed troops in the al-Houthi-Ismaili borderland between Yemen and Saudi Arabia in late 2009, STRATFOR picked up indications that the al-Houthis were receiving some support from Iran, albeit nothing that was considered a game-changer in the rebellion. With unrest spreading throughout eastern Arabia and the Yemeni state falling into a deepening political crisis, the Saudis now have to worry about Iran exploiting a second front through Yemen to threaten the Saudi underbelly. This is in addition to all the other "usual" security issues afflicting Yemen, most notably the threat posed by al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which uses Yemen as a staging ground for attempts at more strategic attacks in the Saudi kingdom.

With distractions mounting in the region and Saleh still counting on a large network of familial and tribal ties to hold on to power, Saudi Arabia does not appear to have formed a coherent policy on its southern neighbor. This likely explains quiet complaints by Yemeni officials that they have been getting mixed signals from the Saudi kingdom in dealing with the current crisis. Now that the situation in Yemen has reached a tipping point, the Saudis will have to make a call on Yemen. Both Mohsen and the Al Ahmar family have a close relationship with the Saudis. The Saudi plan for Yemen is still likely being worked out, but any contingency involving a prominent political space for an Islamist like Mohsen is cause for concern for countries like the United States. Though speculation has arisen over a possible Saudi military intervention in Yemen, the likelihood of such a scenario is low. The Saudi royals are unlikely to fend for Saleh at this stage, and even if they did, they would face enormous difficulty in maintaining lines of supply to its southern neighbor to quell swelling unrest in the country when the army and tribal landscape are already split.

Yemen may border Saudi Arabia, but the geography of this part of the Arabian Peninsula poses logistical challenges far greater than what exists between eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Even if Riyadh decided it wanted to deploy its armed forces to protect Saleh, it would not be as simple as sending troops across a causeway into Sanaa.

Saleh in a Regional Context

Saleh is no doubt a political victim of the current wave of Middle East unrest and faces tougher days ahead in trying to maintain control. But he also finds himself in a very different situation from than Mubarak's Egypt or Ben Ali's Tunisia. Both Egypt and Tunisia had institutions, most critically the armed forces, able to stand apart from their unpopular leaders and sacrifice them at the appropriate time. Though Mubarak and Ben Ali had built patronage networks throughout the countries' ruling parties and business sectors, their family names were not entrenched in the security apparatus, as is Saleh's.

In some ways, Saleh's case is more akin to that of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, who presides over a tribal society split along an east-west axis like Yemen's north-south axis.

Though Yemen is more advanced politically and institutionally than Libya, both Gadhafi and Saleh have insulated their regimes by deliberately preventing the development of alternative bases of power, relying mostly on complex tribal alliances and militaries commanded by nepotism to rule. Such regimes take decades to build and an iron fist to maintain, making the removal of a single leader typically more trouble than it is worth. Though the system has worked for more than three decades for Saleh, the president's carefully managed support network is now rapidly eroding. Saudi Arabia is now being force to make a tough call on the future of Yemen at a time when Riyadh cannot afford another crisis in the Persian Gulf region.

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