

### Yemen: GCC roadmap to nowhere: elite bargaining and political infighting block a meaningful transition

Transfeld, Mareike

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## Yemen: GCC Roadmap to Nowhere

Elite Bargaining and Political Infighting Block a Meaningful Transition

Mareike Transfeld

The transformation process in Yemen, as initiated and defined by the roadmap of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is frequently praised as a model for a peaceful transition. Despite some delay, formally speaking, the process appears to be on track. It has just entered a new phase with the conclusion of the National Dialogue Conference (NDC) at the end of January 2014 and the establishment of the constitutional drafting committee in March. While the results of the NDC present a good basis for the future Yemeni order, increased violent conflict on the ground is casting doubt on the way ahead. Rivaling elite factions continue to exploit the transition process for their own political and economic interests. This has blocked the emergence of a more participatory system. To support a meaningful transition, Germany and the European Union should pressure the transitional government to address the legitimate grievances of the popular movements that are challenging the rule of the old elites.

The GCC roadmap, signed in November 2011 after 10 months of popular protest, initiated a transfer of power from then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh to his vice president. The agreement also mandated a reform of the fragmented Yemeni security apparatus and the NDC to resolve the country's internal conflicts. However, rather than being a process that includes all social and political groups in the country, the transition in Yemen has evolved into a power struggle within the elite.

Since the transfer of power, Yemeni politics have been moving toward a tri-polar elite constellation: interim President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi; the alliance of the Ahmar family and General Ali Mohsin;

and the family of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh (see Box 1, p. 2). At the heart of the conflict between the three alliances stands access to the state's institutions and its resources, which serve the various factions by securing their economic interests and maintaining patronage networks that consolidate their power.

The international community has been driving and monitoring the transition process, motivated mainly by its interest in the country's stability. Given Yemen's dependence on foreign aid and the fear of disciplinary measures based on UN resolution 2140 of late February 2014, which threatens sanctions against individuals who obstruct or undermine the transition process, no

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### Box 1: Key figures

#### SALEH ALLIANCE:

**Ali Abdullah Saleh:** President until February 2012; Secretary-General, GPC.

**Ahmed Ali:** Son of Ali Abdullah Saleh; until 2013 Commander of Republican Guards.

**Ali Mohsin:** Same tribe as the Saleh family and Commander of First Armored Division. Defected to opposition in March 2011. Now forms alliance with Al-Ahmar family.

#### HADI ALLIANCE:

**Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi:** Interim President since 2012, Vice-President (1994–2012); member of GPC.

**Abdulkarim al-Eryani:** Former Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, Advisor to Ali Abdullah Saleh; member of GPC.

**Muslim Brotherhood** leadership of *Islah* as well as the **leaders of other oppositional parties**, such as the Yemen Socialist Party.

#### AL-AHMAR ALLIANCE:

**Abdullah al-Ahmar** (died in 2007): Supreme sheikh of Hashid tribal federation and President of *Islah* party.

**Sadeq al-Ahmar:** Eldest son of Abdullah al-Ahmar; supreme sheikh of Hashid.

**Hamid al-Ahmar:** Son of Abdullah al-Ahmar, business tycoon, and high ranking member of *Islah*.

elite faction can afford to openly obstruct the process. While the elites profess support for the transitional process, they continue to use their networks in tribes, political parties, state institutions, and the media to claim legitimacy, delegitimize competitors, and curry favor with external sponsors. Due to these elite maneuvers, the implementation of the GCC initiative has been delayed, with negotiations in the NDC dragging on for months in a volatile political environment and increasing insecurity. As a consequence, the term of transitional President

Hadi – and with it the transitional period – was extended for another year on 25 January 2014.

The different elite coalitions have different interests with regard to the implementation of the GCC initiative. A successful formal implementation is in the interest of **President Hadi and his loyalists**, as it will guarantee the support of the international community – on which they mainly rely – and favors their drive to occupy political positions and control state institutions. However, despite Hadi's professed support for political change and his close cooperation with the international community, neither comprehensive reforms nor an immediate implementation of the NDC results can be expected, as persisting patronage networks and tribal loyalties render reforms in state institutions difficult.

The **Ahmar family and Ali Mohsin** are not aiming for office themselves. Rather, they are trying to use the GCC roadmap to ensure the establishment of a system that functions to their advantage. This includes their business interests in the telecommunication and oil sectors. Yet, in the course of the violent conflicts in northern Yemen, the Ahmar family has lost much tribal support, and thus political influence.

**Ex-President Saleh and his supporters** are interested in seeing the implementation of the GCC initiative fail, as this would legitimize them vis-à-vis the transitional president. The group behind Saleh is aiming for political offices, as their economic interests are related to the control of the military. Although the results of the NDC prohibit any individual who has served in the military in the last 10 years to run for the presidency, it cannot be ruled out that this group will attempt to nominate Ahmed Ali – Saleh's son and former commander of the Republican Guards – as a candidate in the presidential elections scheduled for 2015. With instability increasing, a comeback of the Saleh family and a partial restoration of the pre-2011 regime continues to be a possibility.

## The Saleh regime before 2011

Before the 2011 uprising, the Yemeni regime was based on an alliance between the Saleh and Ahmar families. The **Saleh family** and members of Saleh's tribe, the Sanhan, were high-ranking military officers who collectively controlled the security apparatus. Through their positions within the military and within the military-controlled Yemen Economic Corporation (YECO), they were able to secure vast economic gains. YECO is the country's main importer of food, among other things, and a major player in the Yemeni economy. On the political level, this group was (and is) represented by the General People's Congress (GPC), which had been the main ruling party for decades. As a non-ideological entity, it was designed to channel patronage and coopt influential social actors, including potential opponents.

The **Ahmar family** derives its influence from its leading position in the Hashid tribal federation, the most powerful tribal coalition in Yemen. The Ahmar family has established one of the biggest business empires in Yemen, the al-Ahmar Group, with interests in crude oil, telecommunication, import and export, and tourism markets. Sadeq al-Ahmar, the eldest of 10 Ahmar brothers, is currently the supreme sheikh of the Hashid, while the younger Hamid al-Ahmar has emerged as a prominent businessman and politician.

The Ahmars are closely linked to Islah, a party comprised of the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, as well as conservative tribesmen. Islah was created by northern elites after unification of South and North Yemen in 1990. Throughout the 1990s, Islah remained a close ally of Saleh's GPC, which ruled Yemen from 1997 until 2011.

The initial cracks within this elite coalition emerged when President Saleh began to groom his son, Ahmed Ali, as successor to the presidency in the early 2000s. Saleh's strategy to marginalize potential competitors to his son and to centralize power in the hands of his immediate family gave rise

to discord between the elite factions. By weakening Ali Mohsin militarily, Saleh alienated his long-term confidant, the commander of the first armored division, who hails from the same tribe as the Saleh family. The fissure between Saleh and the Ahmar family began to widen in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections. Hamid al-Ahmar was the first member of the inner circle to openly defect from Saleh and lead the Islah party in its vocal opposition to the government. It was at this time that Islah fully joined the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), a strong alliance of five opposition parties.

## Changing elite coalitions

As the first step of the GCC roadmap, an interim government that was equally composed of GPC and JMP representatives was sworn in in December 2011. In February 2012, Hadi was endorsed by both parties as presidential candidate and confirmed in a public vote without competition. The opposition's increased political influence was now reflected in the unity government, with Hadi as the transitional president building a new (if weak) pole between the two equally strong elite alliances. At the same time, the relatives of Saleh and Ali Mohsin retained their positions within the military.

Yet, the GCC roadmap mandated a restructuring of the security apparatus, with the goal of reorganizing the military and security services under the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior, respectively. With this restructuring process, the power balance within the elite was bound to change, as it implicitly aimed at removing Saleh's relatives from the armed forces. Indeed, it led to the weakening of the Saleh faction, whereas Hadi and the Ahmar-Ali Mohsin alliance were initially strengthened.

Although Hadi, who was responsible for the implementation of the military reforms, faced resistance from individual officers and troops concerning the personnel changes within the military, he was

supported in the implementation by UN Special Advisor on Yemen, Jamal Benomar. While keeping Ali Mohsin in place as a counterweight to Ahmed Ali, who remained in charge of the well-trained and well-equipped Republican Guards, Hadi began to remove Saleh loyalists and family members from their positions in the security apparatus. In August 2012, a series of presidential decrees removed troops from the command of Ahmed Ali and, to a lesser extent, Ali Mohsin, thus weakening both men from below. Only after these measures did Hadi move to replace both Ahmed Ali and Ali Mohsin. However, while the former was dispatched to become Yemen's ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, Ali Mohsin was appointed presidential advisor on military affairs. Although he formally lost his position in the army, he has not only remained in the country but has also indirectly retained his influence among many officers and troops previously under his command.

Through the restructuring of the military, **Saleh and his supporters** – representing the first center of power – lost influence on the top level of the institution. The family of the former president still retains support among the troops, however. This is particularly true for units previously led by Ahmed Ali, which had been paid, trained, and treated better than the rest of the armed forces. The defection of the Ahmars also affected the tribal support base of the Salehs, yet the former president retains the loyalty of various tribal leaders, some of whom are intermarried with the family or are members of the GPC. Also, as Saleh has remained Secretary-General of the GPC, the party still serves him and his supporters as a vehicle to exercise political influence. Increasingly, however, the party has become divided between die-hard Saleh loyalists and a current that would prefer if the new president took the helm of the party. The former, also referred to as the GPC “hawks,” accuse President Hadi of colluding with the international community and the former opposition. Military

restructuring, in their view, does not aim at turning the military into a truly national institution but is geared to allocate more power to President Hadi himself, as evidenced by his stacking of the armed forces with supporters from his southern home governorate, Abyan.

**Hadi and his supporters in the GPC** – the “dove” faction – form the second center of power and profess to offer compromise with other forces. Supporters of the dove faction in the past played an important role in negotiating with the opposition. It does not come as a surprise that they have formed an alliance with the leadership of the JMP. Although this elite faction is rather weak in terms of tribal and military support, it enjoys the backing of the international community. The GCC roadmap has served to legitimize their claim to political power, and thus this group has gained the most since the signing of the power-transfer deal. They have also come out as the strongest proponents of the GCC initiative.

The **Ahmar family, Ali Mohsin, and Islah** form the third center of political power. The Ahmar family was unaffected by the military restructuring. In particular, they saw to it that many Saleh supporters were purged from positions in the state apparatus and replaced by members of Islah. Potentially, their interest to retain power by means of patronage and tribal loyalty may put them on a collision course with the forces around Hadi that attempt to arrogate more authority to the state institutions that they control. Since the signing of the GCC initiative, the Ahmar family and Ali Mohsin have scaled down their direct presence on the political stage and instead pursued their interest through Islah via the implementation of the roadmap.

### **The rise of identity politics**

Although access to political power and resources is at the heart of the conflict between Yemen's different regions, the elites frame the conflicts with sectarian language in an attempt to instigate con-

flicts between their respective Zaidi and Shafi'i supporters (see Box 2).

This has been the case in the north in particular, where the government has been engaged in a conflict with the so-called Houthis. Motivated by their demand for political participation and economic development as well as the defense of their Zaidi religious tradition, the Houthis waged six rounds of war against the government between 2004 and 2010. Since their fall from power in 2011, the **pro-Saleh hawk faction of the GPC** has discovered the Houthis as potential allies. Toward the end of the NDC, a loose and informal alliance between the two groups emerged. On the popular level, Zaidi centers within the capital that supported Saleh during the 2011 uprising have become sympathetic to the plight of the Houthi movement. The **Ahmar family, the Hashid tribes allied with it, and General Ali Mohsin**, on the other hand, have long since maintained links to Sunni Islamist currents.

As a consequence, tensions between Hashid tribes and the Houthis have repeatedly escalated into violent clashes in the Ahmar stronghold of Amran, a mere 50 km north of Sanaa. In the spring of 2014, the Houthi movement reached the outskirts of Sanaa, causing widespread fears about the possibility of the violent conflict entering the capital. The Houthi movement has aimed at weakening the Ahmar family and Islah by gaining territorial control, which it could then use for leverage on the political level. In the course of the conflict, the Ahmars, who are widely perceived as being corrupt and following their own interests, lost the support of a significant number of Hashid tribes, who began to support the Houthi movement. Besides facilitating tribal arbitration, until recently Hadi had not taken serious measures to stop the Houthis' advancement. In late April 2014 the Houthis agreed to negotiate with the government. Hadi's strategy appears to have been to use the conflict to weaken the Ahmar family, after Saleh and his supporters had already been weakened. Yet, with

### Box 2: Shafi'is and Zaidis

Whereas central and southern Yemen predominantly adhere to the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam, between one-third and half of the population of Yemen are (nominal) adherents of Zaidism, a branch of Shiite Islam distinct from the version practiced in Iran. According to the Zaidi tradition, political rule is restricted to the class of Sayyids, who are considered to be descendants of Prophet Mohammed. The 1962 revolution overthrew the theocratic rule of the Sayyids and established a republic in which they were no longer privileged. Saleh and his predecessors, as well as influential tribal leaders, had no interest in emphasizing this separate religious identity, which restricts power to a class they were not a part of, and which legitimizes rebellion against unjust leaders. Rather, they encouraged the spread of strict interpretations of Sunni Islam propagated in particular by Saudi Arabia, such as Salafism. Resentment against the influence of such ideologies, paired with social marginalization, has prompted resistance against the central government in the northern Saada province since the early 2000s. The resistance has since taken on the character of a Zaidi revivalist movement, named after its first leader, Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi.

Hashid tribes turning against their leader, Saleh supporters have profited from the recent developments, as they have weakened their strongest opponent.

### The National Dialogue Conference

Interim President Hadi has had an interest in pushing forward the implementation of the GCC roadmap. Besides the restructuring of the security apparatus, the NDC was the second major component of the GCC roadmap's approach. Ostensibly, the goal of the

NDC was to bring together the various conflicting groups and establish a national consensus. The conclusion of the NDC on 21 January 2014 was internationally celebrated as a success of the transition process.

Undeniably, the conference was an achievement, in that it brought together conflicting parties, elites, and members of grassroots movements, such as the youth, al-Hirak, the Houthis, and women (for more detail, see SWP Comments 23/2013). Also, the results of the individual working groups (Southern Issue, Sa'ada Issue, Transitional Justice, State-Building, Good Governance, Military/Security, Special Entities, Rights/Freedom, and Development) provide a good basis for the new constitution to be drafted.

Yet, the conference was dominated by the old elites (GPC: 112 out of 565 seats; Islah: 50 seats). The dominance of Hadi's supporters in vital committees in particular ensured that the results of the NDC would be favorable to the transitional president and the international community. While the so-called independent youth had a great impact on the outcomes of the NDC, some of their more progressive demands – such as a transitional justice law and a reform of the telecommunication sector, which would have touched on the interests of the old elites – were blocked by the GPC hawks.

Also, the demands of the representatives of the southern movement were frequently ignored. The southern movement, commonly referred to as al-Hirak (Arabic for “The Movement”) had begun calling for civil disobedience and protests against what it perceived to be a northern occupation since 2007. Pent-up grievances deriving from the general political and economic marginalization of the formerly independent south boosted al-Hirak. It developed into a potent protest movement demanding the resolution of land disputes in the south, the reinstatement and compensation of forcibly retired military officers and state bureaucrats, and the release of political prisoners. But as these demands have not yet been addressed, it has continued to demand secession.

With regard to the southern question in particular, the NDC was not able to come to a consensus. Federalism was brought up as a solution to the various conflicts the country is facing, particularly the secessionist conflict with al-Hirak. The question of the federal regions was the greatest bone of contention for the delegates, as it touched directly on the distribution of power and resources. All three elite factions vying for power in Sanaa share similar attitudes toward the south: secession is a red line. This is not only because the political elite is overwhelmingly northern, but also because separation along the pre-1990 borders would leave the northern rump state with little oil.

With no solution to the southern issue in sight during the NDC, popular confidence in a positive outcome decreasing, and escalating violence across the country, President Hadi presented a document to the NDC in late December 2013 stipulating that all parties agreed to a just solution for the south, but that the exact form of the federal structure would be determined later. He then established a committee outside the NDC that adopted a controversial six-region solution. Thus, an open failure of the NDC on this issue was avoided by bypassing the NDC and imposing the solution preferred by the Hadi alliance.

The adopted solution can be seen as an achievement in two ways: it secured the vital interests of the three elite groups and served to maintaining the support of the international community for Hadi's group. However, the solution has not been accepted by most of the factions making up the fragmented al-Hirak movement. The Houthi movement has likewise expressed opposition and criticized that the decision was taken outside of the NDC. Some GPC hawks appear to oppose the conclusion out of principle. Thus, violent conflict in the north and protests in the south are continuing.

## **The protest movements and the GCC roadmap's shortcomings**

The conclusion of the NDC did not achieve its goal to reconcile the conflicting groups. Also, the government in Sanaa undertook few trust-building measures. Thus, the grassroots movements continue to distrust it and rely on protests and violence as strategies to attain their goals. So far, none of the immediate grievances that drove the 2011 protests have been addressed, including extreme poverty, high unemployment, and widespread corruption. Even though grassroots movements played an important role in the 2011 uprising, they have had little political influence since then, with the transitional period being dominated by the old elites. This did not happen by coincidence but can be traced back to the approach chosen with the GCC initiative.

What had begun as small protests in January 2011 developed into a full-fledged, countrywide, popular uprising that lasted for 10 months. In absolute terms, of all the countries participating in the Arab Spring, Yemen had the largest protests by far. The new popular protest movement encouraged by the Arab Spring occupied public squares in all major cities and demanded the overthrow of the regime. United by their demands for political change, al-Hirak and the Houthis quickly declared solidarity with the "youth revolution," organized protests in their home governorates, and joined the main protest square in Yemen's capital, Sanaa.

The opposition parties and those members of the political elite who had been at odds with Saleh used the opportunity to put pressure on the regime. In March 2011, after more than 50 protesters had been killed in the capital, General Ali Mohsin and Sadeq al-Ahmar formally defected to the opposition. As a consequence, the protests became better organized and grew even further in size. Despite the weight that the JMP and the elites added to the independent protest movement, many of the activists viewed the parties' and elites'

participation with skepticism. Perceived as part of the same regime they were trying to bring down, activists saw the elites as hijacking the revolution.

In April 2011, the GCC – backed by the UN, the US, and the EU – put forward what became known as the GCC initiative to resolve the crisis and initiate a peaceful transfer of power. By October 2011, international pressure on Saleh to sign the roadmap proposed by the GCC mounted, with both the UN and the EU threatening to impose sanctions. After securing legal immunity for himself and his closest supporters, and after the JMP agreed on vice president and long-term GPC member Hadi to become interim president, the deal was finally signed in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, in November 2011.

To negotiate the transfer of power, the external mediators had turned to established leaders and political bodies, namely the GPC (and thus Saleh) and the JMP (and thus the Ahmar family and Ali Mohsin). The youth movement that had had a crucial role in the uprising was ignored. The Houthi movement and al-Hirak were likewise excluded from these negotiations. With their reliance only on the old elites, the sponsors of the GCC roadmap supported the maintaining of the old system, whereas the street lost its leverage in politics. On the elite level, as detailed above, the GCC initiative enabled a reshuffling of political power and access to state resources.

The UN and the initiative's Western sponsors claim that the international engagement aims at achieving a democratic transition in Yemen. Above all, however, it is the attempt to contain the threat of the further destabilization of fragile Yemen, which would allow Al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula to expand its already worrisome presence, that drives international engagement. Rather than a genuinely inclusive system, the priority thus is to achieve political stability and to maintain territorial integrity.



## Conclusion

The GCC initiative has effected a superficial transition on the political level and a fragile balance between three camps vying to maximize their grip on power. By putting process before substance, the implementation of the roadmap is, however, liable to lead neither to democracy nor to stability. The international community should acknowledge that, despite the conclusion of the NDC, the conflicts in the country are far from resolved. Further dialogue must address the conflict between the three political factions and work to achieve a buy-in from the Houthis, al-Hirak, the youth movement, and other civil society actors.

Indeed, with UNSC resolution 2140, the international community has sent the timely signal that obstruction of the transition will not be tolerated. Yet, it should be careful when identifying the source of obstruction and avoid giving carte blanche to actors who attempt to bend the process to their own ends. Rather, European facilitators of the GCC initiative should pressure the transitional government to build trust among the various groups by answering their legitimate grievances. Implementing those results of the NDC that were, in fact, consensual would be the most obvious starting point. Given the state of the Yemeni security forces and the balance of military power, only compromise with the Houthis and al-Hirak can restore stability. Germany, being very popular among Yemenis, could play an important role as a mediator that is perceived as neutral. Such mediation would be of particular importance between northern elites and the southern movement.

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**SWP**  
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik  
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4  
10719 Berlin  
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0  
Fax +49 30 880 07-100  
www.swp-berlin.org  
swp@swp-berlin.org

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