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BRIEFING PAPER:

YEMEN/ A month after Saleh's return

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President Saleh left Yemen on June 4th to receive treatment in Saudi Arabia a day after suffering a terrible attack in the mosque of his residential compound in Sanaa. Eight people died and more than 150 top military and political officials were injured, some of them severely. The results of the investigation carried out by FBI officials have not been disclosed yet as these conclusions are probably being used to force both parties to reach an agreement. Saleh's absence for more than three months led the country to immobilism. The weeks-long shortage of oil made hundreds of cars come to a standstill and entailed a rise in the price of basic necessities due to the markets' shortage of supply. Besides, the supposed tribal boycott of the power plants in Mareb caused constant blackouts in every city, especially in Sanaa. Furthermore, the intermittent confrontation between the Yemeni security forces and Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar's (Saleh's strongest rival since March) allies, heralded a possible war in Yemen and made high rank businessmen and capital leave the country. Many premises and businesses were forced to close and the city of Sanaa was literally taken by armed factions. Change Square and its surroundings was controlled by the deserter General Ali Mohsen, the district of Hasaba by al-Ahmar's men and the rest of the city by the checkpoints of the security forces and armed civil supporters of the regime.

Zanzibar, in the province of Abyan, fell to supposed al-Qaeda activists. There were constant bombings at Taiz due to the confrontation between General Qairan, head of the province's security, and the pro-revolutionary tribes. Another conflict took place in Arhab, 20 kilometres from Sanaa, this time between Saleh's Republican Guard on the one hand and Sadiq al-Ahmar allies and General Ali Mohsen's troops on the other. Saada was out of the government's control and the Houthi Fares Mana'a had proclaimed himself governor of the province. In other regions such as al-Jawf and Mareb major problems were occurring on a daily basis.

The President's absence could have been a great chance for Vice-president Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi to act as president-in-office conducting negotiations with the opposition forces and coming to an agreement regarding the peaceful transfer of power. However, the opposition's intolerance plus internal pressures within the government party and Saleh's relatives, wore out this chance to put an end to the crisis.

Many analysts believed the international powers would pressure Saleh to announce his resignation from Saudi Arabia but such pressure was insufficient, partly through fear of the reaction of Saleh's relatives' (as they were and are in charge of the key positions in the Yemeni security forces) and partly because there was considerable mistrust towards opposition leaders such as Sadiq al-Ahmar and Ali Mohsen, known for their Salafi tendencies.

The President came back to Yemen on September 23rd, after spending 112 days in Saudi Arabia. Hostilities intensified during the five days preceding his arrival and the repression in Change Square, in Sanaa, claimed more than 50 victims in three days. The fact that, for the first time, pro-revolutionary Ali Mohsen's troops responded to the attack and that the clash between Saleh's security forces and Sadiq al-Ahmar's tribal men recommenced, foreboded a worst-case scenario.

It was, without a doubt, an operation orchestrated by Saleh to announce his return, his way of stating clearly what would happen to the country if an agreement was not reached.

The official speech of the president took place two days after his return. The speech itself was the same as always: he asserted repeatedly that Yemen is going through its most dangerous moment in history and asked for a return to the negotiations, recalling that there are still legal ways in the Constitution to solve the crisis. He announced elections at all levels, presidential, parliamentary and local; nevertheless he said they would only take place once the government and the opposition had reached an agreement. He reminded he had delegated the negotiations to Abd al-Rab Mansur al-Hadi and hinted that due to his health conditions he might have to leave the country again. The reaction of the opposition was immediate and unequivocal: they said no to the negotiation, no to the immunity and called for the immediate resignation of Saleh.

Almost a month after the president's return, the situation in Yemen is deteriorating significantly. The opposition bet on increasing the demonstrations and tried to expand their protests outside the perimeter under the control of Ali Mohsen. The attack on the demonstrators was responded to by the pro-revolutionary soldiers and a few days later the conflict in the neighborhood of Hasaba renewed. Three months later Sanaa had again turned into a battle field. The death of hundreds of people in Sanaa in the last weeks has caused a significant change in the position of the international community. Since the antigovernment protests started in Yemen, international pressure to obtain Saleh's resignation has not been as evident as it was in other countries in the region. Maybe the motivations for this were, on the one hand the belief that the president of Yemen is a good ally in the war on terrorism, and on the other hand suspicion towards those who took the lead in the uprising such as the al-Ahmar family, Ali Mohsen and al-Zindani. The United States has not taken a convincing position regarding the crisis in Yemen. However, since Saleh returned to the country and the conflicts in the capital got worse, it looks like the world's superpower has taken a more energetic tone when it comes to asking the Yemeni presidency to sign the Gulf Initiative and leave power. In the coming weeks a UN Resolution is expected and it may accelerate things on the ground.

Despite the fact that the text is still under negotiation, Rupert Colville, Spokesman of the High Commissioner of the United Nations for Human Rights, and the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon recently declared the possibility that Saleh's immunity being guaranteed as stated under the Gulf Initiative, could be revised. On the other hand, a delegation from the Transition Council recently visited Russia, an act which must be interpreted as an attempt to avoid a Russian veto in the Security Council.

If the expectations are fulfilled and the immunity of Saleh is removed, this new situation would limit the president's options even further. Without the incentive of immunity, and his demand not being satisfied that Ali Mohsen and the al-Ahmar family also be forced to leave the country for their shared responsibility in the violence of these last months in Yemen; Saleh may force a civil war in a last attempt to hold on to power.