

As we have discussed, “conflict” is a major theme throughout this unit. **Read the article below and mark facts that shock or surprise you with a “\*.”** Then, in exactly 26 words, summarize: What is going on in Yemen?!?

## Yemen — Protests (2011)



Glen Carey/Bloomberg News

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Yemen is a poor, deeply divided country that has been in turmoil since January 2011, when the example of the Tunisian revolution set off mass street demonstrations calling for the resignation of President [Ali Abdullah Saleh](#). Finally, after months of violent protests, Mr. Saleh [signed an agreement on Nov. 23, 2011](#) immediately transferring power to his vice president.

The agreement, meant to end Mr. Saleh's 33 years of authoritarian rule, allowed him to retain his title and certain privileges until the new presidential elections, scheduled for Feb. 21, 2012. But in mid-January, the power transfer was challenged when a [top government official hinted that the elections might be delayed](#). In an interview the official said it would be "difficult" to hold the elections as planned because security in the country was deteriorating.

Opposition figures quickly criticized his comments, and a spokesman for Yemen's vice president said there would be no delay. Still, the muddled signals, along with reports of new violence in the country, underscored the difficulties Yemeni officials face as they try to implement an agreement that is intended to quiet a year of popular protests and start the country's political transition.

Mr. Saleh's intentions have remained frustratingly hard to gauge. A day after the power-transfer signing, his loyalists [were accused of killing protesters](#) in an escalation of violence that has raised questions about who was controlling the government's militias.

Mr. Saleh then [declared a general amnesty for people](#) who had committed "follies" during the uprising, although he made an exception for those responsible for the [bombing](#) that badly wounded him at his presidential palace in June. After the bombing, he left the country for treatment in Saudi Arabia, returning in September.

Fighting continued through December, with security forces and Saleh loyalists killing protesters in the city of Taiz as well as the capital of Sana.

On Jan. 22, 2012, Mr. Saleh left Yemen, headed to New York for treatment, according to Yemeni and American officials. The State Department said in a statement, “the sole purpose of this travel is for medical treatment and we expect that he will stay for a limited time that corresponds to the duration of this treatment.”

The statement’s careful wording reflected the vigorous debate within the Obama administration over whether to admit Mr. Saleh, a longtime American ally, and risk appearing to harbor an authoritarian leader accused of responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of antigovernment protesters.

In making their decision, administration officials cited the advantages of having Mr. Saleh leave the country before the presidential election scheduled for Feb. 21. Mr. Saleh had previously made contradictory statements about whether he would leave the country and when he would leave office. In December 2011, he said he was leaving Yemen for treatment in the United States, and then reversed himself two weeks later.

In a televised speech on Jan 22, described as a farewell address, he said he would return to Yemen when his treatment was finished. Although he had agreed to leave office, he said in the speech that he was handing power to his vice president, Abdel Rabbo Mansour Hadi, temporarily.

On Jan. 21, Parliament passed a law granting him immunity, and extending the immunity to subordinates who committed politically motivated crimes. Parliament also approved Vice President Hadi as the consensus candidate, agreed on by Mr. Saleh’s party and the opposition, for the presidential election.

### **Beginning of the Protests**

The demonstrations first began in late January 2011, at roughly the same time as those in Egypt, and picked up steam in February. Mr. Saleh’s initial heavy-handed response only fueled the protests, and his initial offers to step aside at a future date seemed to equally embolden the demonstrators.

A turning point appears to have come on March 18, in a bloody but failed attempt to break the back of the protest. As tens of thousands of demonstrators rose from their noon prayers, security forces and government supporters opened fire. At least 50 people were killed and more than 100 injured, but the attack failed to disperse the crowd.

Mr. Saleh responded by firing his cabinet. On March 21, five army commanders and one of the country’s most important tribal leaders threw their support behind the protesters. A stream of Yemeni officials resigned from the government,

including the mayor of the restive southern city of Aden, a provincial governor and at least one of the country's ambassadors.

Yemen's opposition coalition, the Joint Meetings Parties, proposed a plan under which Mr. Saleh would leave at the end of 2011, and he agreed. But protesters then rejected the plan and called for Mr. Saleh's immediate ouster.

In April the United States, which had long supported Mr. Saleh, quietly shifted positions after concluding that he was unlikely to bring about reforms. On April 7, the Gulf Cooperation Council, an organization of oil-rich Persian Gulf states, joined the increasing number of international voices calling for a transfer of presidential powers to a government of national unity.

On April 23, Mr. Saleh said that he accepted a proposal by Gulf mediators that would shift power to his deputy 30 days from the signing of a formal agreement and grant him and his family, who occupy key positions in Yemen's security apparatus, immunity from prosecution. Leaders of the street protests rejected the deal, saying he should leave without condition. After an initial hesitation, the Joint Meetings Parties said it would accept the idea, including immunity, if protests were allowed to continue during the interim period.

Many in the opposition believed that Mr. Saleh was merely playing for time, and in fact, he repeatedly pulled back at the last minute from signing the deal.

### **Al Qaeda in Yemen**

Even before the protests broke out, Yemen had become a major security concern for the United States, because of the growing strength of its Al Qaeda affiliate.

Much of the violent tribal feuds, banditry and kidnapping in Yemen appear beyond the control of the central government. Yemen has the region's largest arms market: the country, with roughly 20 million people, is said to have at least 20 million guns.

Yemen did not become a special concern for the United States until 2000, when Qaeda operatives blasted a hole in the American destroyer Cole, killing 17 sailors. After the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, Yemen joined in a counterterrorism partnership with the United States, and its American-trained forces had some successes in fighting jihadists, even as terrorist attacks on foreign targets continued sporadically.

The jihadists claiming allegiance to Al Qaeda appear to have reorganized and become more methodical, releasing more propaganda materials on the Internet and carrying out more attacks. In July 2007, suicide bombers killed seven Spanish tourists in eastern Yemen, and there were two unsuccessful attacks on oil installations. In September 2008, 10 people were killed (none of them

Americans) when two car bombs were detonated outside the American embassy in Sana, the capital.

[Anwar al-Awlaki](#), the American-born cleric who hid in Yemen and who was killed by a drone strike in September 2011, was perhaps the most sophisticated ideological opponent the United States had faced since 2001. His online lectures and sermons had been linked to more than a dozen terrorist investigations in the United States, Britain and Canada. Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan had exchanged e-mails with Mr. Awlaki before the deadly shooting rampage on Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009. Faisal Shahzad, who tried to set off a car bomb in Times Square in May, 2010, cited Mr. Awlaki as an inspiration.

Several former [Guantánamo](#) detainees fled in 2009 to Yemen from Saudi Arabia and pledged to mount attacks on Saudi Arabia and other countries from their Yemeni redoubt.

### **An Uncertain Future**

The political crisis in Yemen will likely remain acute, not only because of its tribal culture and topography, but also because of its deep poverty, high illiteracy and birth rates, and deeply entrenched government corruption. Its economy is precariously tied to oil resources, which are declining rapidly.

The governing elite has come mainly from the Sunni majority, which makes up 55 percent of the population and is concentrated in the more developed coastal regions of the south and southwest. A Shiite movement, based in the mountainous north, declared independence and its intermittent rebellion has left thousands of people dead since it began in 2004.

The government is also deeply unpopular in the remote provinces where Al Qaeda militants have sought sanctuary. The tribes there tend to regularly switch sides, making it difficult to depend on them for information about Al Qaeda. “My state is anyone who fills my pocket with money,” goes one old tribal motto.

For years, Mr. Saleh managed tribal-dominated Yemen by propping up scores of carefully chosen tribal leaders, giving them money and weapons and placing them in important positions in government. The loyalty of these empowered sheiks largely guaranteed the loyalty of their followers.

But tribesmen from rural areas made up the majority of the tens of thousands spending day and night at the demonstration in Sana. With large numbers of them unemployed, their vow to stay at Sana’s encampment until Mr. Saleh steps down carried weight.

### **An Opposition Group...Or Was It?**

For years, Islah, the country's largest and best organized opposition group, played a double game in Yemeni politics, maintaining close ties to the government of Mr. Saleh while it also cultivated a network of supporters to defeat him.

Its shifting alliances, reflecting different currents within the movement, helped keep Islah ahead of its opposition rivals in Yemen. That strategy also kept Islah out of power, unable to credibly offer an alternative to a government they were seen to be in league with.

Unlike the largely untested Islamist parties that are rising to power in the wake of the Arab uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, Yemen's Islamists may find they have a credibility gap because they have participated in politics for more than two decades, analysts said. Islah's leaders — even if they hold strong positions in the interim unity government — will have to contend with the party's mixed record of governance, confusion about its ideological goals and the continued dominance of Mr. Saleh's ruling party, which remains intact, analysts said.

But where they do share a common experience with some of their brethren, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, is they are experiencing internal divisions. Days after Islah's leaders signed on to an agreement that required Mr. Saleh to hand over his executive powers in exchange for a promise of immunity, many of the group's members were still protesting in the streets and fuming at what they saw as an unacceptable compromise.

For their part, Islah's leaders are trying to use the moment to reintroduce themselves to Yemenis. During a two-year transitional period, they will share power with other opposition groups and the ruling party in a national unity government. Islah politicians are expected to be named to important cabinet posts.

Founded in 1990 by members of the Yemeni Muslim Brotherhood and powerful tribesmen after the unification of North and South Yemen, Islah colluded with Mr. Saleh to blunt the influence of the Socialist Party. By the end of the decade, Islah had been transformed to the opposition, though one of its founders and most influential leaders, Sheik Abdullah al-Ahmar, remained an ally of Mr. Saleh.

Yemeni analysts say Islah's future success will depend in large part on how it manages its own diverse membership, in a party that includes Muslim Brotherhood members, ultraconservatives called Salafis, tribal sheiks and businessmen.

## **Background**

Home to one of the world's oldest civilizations, Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world as well as a haven for Islamic jihadists and the site of what

amounts to a secret American war against leaders of a branch that [Al Qaeda](#) has established there — a branch that Western officials fear has had increasing freedom since the unrest began.

Until the protests, the world's attention had mainly been focused on fears that the country could become [Al Qaeda](#)'s next operational and training hub, rivaling the lawless tribal areas of Pakistan. Yemen's stability was of increasing concern to the United States, which has provided \$250 million in military aid in the past five years. The Obama administration was nurturing enduring ties with Mr. Saleh's government to prod him to combat Al Qaeda. The U.S. military was conducting airstrikes even before the Christmas Day 2009 attempted bombing of a Detroit-bound jet by a [23-year-old Nigerian man](#) who later claimed that Qaeda leaders in Yemen had trained and equipped him.

The delicate position of the United States in dealing with Mr. Saleh seemed as evident in Yemen as it currently is in [Bahrain](#), where pro-American leaders have cracked down on adversaries on the street clamoring for the monarchy to make way for democratic change.

Diplomatic cables obtained by [WikiLeaks](#) and made available to several news organizations offered [an intimate view](#) of the wily, irreverent and sometimes erratic Yemeni autocrat. Mr. Saleh has sometimes accommodated and other times rebuffed American requests on counter terrorism.

## **History**

With its location at the southwestern end of the Arabian Peninsula, the land of ancient Yemen became rich from the spice trade. So rich that the Romans called the land Arabia Felix — Happy Arabia — and Augustus Caesar tried, but failed, to annex it. That prosperity overlapped with the rule of an Islamic caliphate in the 7th century. When the caliphate broke up, Islamic imams exerted control, sowing the seeds of a theocratic political system that would survive for centuries.

Northern Yemen became part of the Ottoman Empire. Southern Yemen was in the hands of the British after 1839, when they built a protectorate around their port of Aden. North Yemen would become independent of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and declare itself a republic in 1962; it was not until 1967 that the British withdrew from southern Yemen.

When Marxists took over the government of southern Yemen in 1970, many people fled to the north, and a civil war raged for two decades. The conflict became a proxy conflict in the cold war, with the Soviet Union aiding South Yemen, and the United States bolstering the north.

Though north and south were unified as the Republic of Yemen on May 22, 1990, the violence and internecine conflict did not end. The country's extreme topography — with dramatically rugged mountains and remote deserts — helped

create impenetrable fortresses for warring tribes, which have long attacked government officials and foreign tourists, as well as one another.

Today Yemen faces a violent separatist movement in the south and an intermittent [rebellion in the northwest](#), though President Saleh expertly played Yemen's various tribes and factions against one another for decades. When one of the country's most prominent tribal sheiks, Hussein al-Ahmar, [resigned from the ruling party](#), it was a deeply troubling sign for the regime.

<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/yemen/index.html>

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