

YEMEN: Obama's Fourth War Looming?

By [Boris Volkhonsky](#)

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On Wednesday, the US State Department ordered that all “non-essential” US diplomats and family members are to leave Yemen immediately. It also issued a warning to Americans to abstain from travelling to Yemen.

It all happened in the wake of a fierce three-day clash between tribal fighters and government forces. Reports say that up to 72 people died during the fighting.

Yemen is just another stage of the so-called “Arab Spring” that has already toppled governments in a number of Arabic countries and forced NATO to launch a war against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

But the situation in Yemen, in a way, is specific.

What is common with all the other cases is the fact that the national leader President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been in the topmost position for several decades (33 years, to be precise).

What is common with some of the cases is the fact that he, seeing the miserable examples of Egypt and Tunisia, stands firm in his desire to hold on to power.

What is different, though, is the nature of the opposition.

In most previous cases, the opposition was (or, pretended to be) democratic. In Yemen, the opposition is comprised of tribal leaders who do not even conceal their radical Islamist nature.

It is also worth noting that in the previous several years, it was Yemen that turned into the real base for Al Qaeda after the fighting in Afghanistan drew some of it out of that country. “Yemeni Al Qaeda” [Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] has become the most dreaded branch of the international terrorist network.

While fighting in Yemen escalates, President Saleh stays firm in his defiance of all demands that he should step down.

A plan has been devised by the Gulf Co-operation Council calling on him to step down within a month and hand over power to a unity government. The plan also guarantees him immunity from prosecution.

On Wednesday, after talks with British Premier David Cameron, the US President Barack Obama also called on Saleh to step down immediately.

But an official representative of the Yemeni president quoted him as saying, "I will not leave power and I will not leave Yemen."

Now, what, in this context, may the US State Department mean in ordering diplomats and their family members to leave the country?

On the one hand it can be a purely precautionary measure aimed at saving American lives.

But the nature of Obama's foreign policy of the last months has shown that he is ready to pursue a strong-arm approach to whatever "matters of American interest" happen wherever in the world, notwithstanding state borders and other nations' sovereignty.

So, this might well be a last warning to the ruling regime in Yemen, which, if not heard by President Saleh can mean anything, including a direct American military involvement. In this context, the precaution is quite justifiable.

Of course, Saleh can partly rely on the supposition that the US would not want to start a fourth war. More so, after the NATO coalition clearly surpassed the limits set up for a military operation in Libya by the UN Security Council, most of the SC members will be clearly unwilling to give a "go-ahead" to a new operation. Also, seeing that Gaddafi, who stands firm, is now in a better position than, for example, former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, he might be willing to follow that example up to the end.

But even if there is no fourth American war in the Middle East, the Obama administration is sure to mount political pressure on the Yemeni leader. But that, in turn, poses another question: who benefits?

Yes, Saleh is a dictator, like most of his colleagues in the Arabic world. But is the option of the opposition coming to power much better?

When Gaddafi said that the Libyan opposition is linked to Al Qaeda, his words could be taken for pure propaganda. But in the Yemeni case such links are not so difficult to find. And would Obama like, while fighting against the Taliban in Afghanistan, to receive another regime of the same sort (or, even worse) in Yemen?

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