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Saudi Airstrikes on Yemen: Limits to Military Adventurism

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Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes on Yemen on 26 March 2015. Adel al-Jubeir, the kingdom's ambassador to the US, while announcing the air campaign against the Houthi rebels at a press conference in Washington D. C. said that Saudi Arabia "will do anything necessary" to restore "the legitimate government of Yemen" led by President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and protect the Yemenis from Houthi attacks. Observers immediately noted a sharp contradiction in Saudi foreign policy behavior. Just less than two years ago in July 2013, king Abdullah bin Abdulaziz directly backed the Egyptian army to unseat the Muslim Brotherhood-supported, democratically elected and "legitimate" government of President Mohammed Morsi. The legitimacy controversy set aside for a while, the Saudi military move to change the political chemistry in Yemen by bombing the Houthi rebels raises serious questions about the actual political intentions and strategic objectives of Riyadh in a country where multiple contending domestic stakeholders and hostile regional actors are vying for power and influence. In this complex strategic milieu, can the Saudis and their allies, led by the newly crowned King Salman bin Abdulaziz, achieve the two objectives of defeating the Houthi rebels and restoring the deposed President Hadi to power in Sana'a? What does failure to achieve the above two objectives mean for the new King Salman and his kingdom?

The two important points this short analysis builds on are: a) King Salman's attempt to solve an essentially political problem through military intervention has had little chance of success; and, b) the Saudis are most likely to find themselves politically and militarily bogged down in Yemen for years to come, an outcome that may hamstring Saudi influence in the Middle East region. Contrarily, the Saudi failure to bring the Houthi rebels down may mean an expansion of the Iranian sphere of influence in the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, in addition to Tehran's strong presences in Baghdad and Damascus.

Behind Saudi Intervention in Yemen

First off, the Saudi decision to bomb the Houthi rebels, also known as Ansar Allah (partisans of God), should not be viewed as an isolated development; rather, it informs a general pattern in Saudi interventionist foreign policy taking shape in the past few years. In 2009 king Abdullah ordered military strikes on the Houthi stronghold of Sa'ada, a northern Yemeni province bordering Saudi Arabia, to assist then President Ali Abdullah Saleh to stamp out the Houthi fighters who were demanding actions by the Sana'a-based central government to address their political and economic grievances. Prior to that, in 1994 the Saudis punished Ali Abdullah Saleh by supporting the anti-government socialist movement in southern Yemen – a retaliatory action against the Saleh government's support for Saddam Hussein during the 1991 Gulf War. In March 2011, Saudi troops, with GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) backing, entered Bahrain to suppress the Shiites-led pro-democracy movements and provide security to the ruling Al-Khalifa family. The Saudis have also created and funded the Islamic Front in Syria to dislodge the Bashar Al-Assad government.

Riyadh's current intervention in Yemen, codenamed 'Operation Decisive Storm', appears to be a continuation of the 2009 military offensive to subdue the Houthis, though it looks different this time in view of the scale of involvement and operational focus. It has successfully assembled a regional military coalition consisting of all the GCC states save Oman, and Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan and Turkey. Pakistan, a declared partner of the coalition,

subsequently backed away at the behest of its parliament. The US, not a coalition partner, openly declared its support for the Saudi-led air operations to force the Houthi rebels to back down. Almost the whole state of Yemen has been the target of Saudi air operations; in 2009 the primary target area was the northern Sa'ada province – the traditional stronghold of the Houthis.

Two powerful but questionable narratives about the latest Saudi military intervention in Yemen have so far emerged. The first narrative depicts the Houthis as an Iranian proxy in Yemen, and the second narrative frames the Saudi intervention as an extension of Shiite – Sunni rivalry, already bitterly played out in Iraq and Syria. The Saudis claim that Iran stands behind the Houthi rebellion and is driving the Houthis to military victories against Saudi-supported forces to hold sway over Yemen. These exasperations from Riyadh apparently originate from its failure, despite Western support, to topple the Iran-backed Bashar Al-Assad government in Syria and the gradual marginalization of the Sunnis by the majority Shiites in Iraq where Iran also exerts tremendous influence. On top of that, the Saudis view the recent Iran – US efforts to hammer out a permanent deal on the Iranian nuclear issue as promoting Iran's regional ambitions at the expense of Saudi interests. In a nutshell, the Saudi rulers find the Iranian gains in Iraq and Syria, the biggest successes of their historical rival since the Islamic revolution in 1979, quite unacceptable. In October 2014, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal called on Iran to withdraw its 'occupying forces' from Syria, a position that possibly exaggerated the degree of Iranian control and influence in the Arab country. President Bashar al-Assad welcomed Iranian support to fight back the Sunni rebel fighters but his government, which also enjoys solid Russian backing, has hardly been an Iranian surrogate.

The connections between Iran and the Houthis, in contrast to firm Iran-Iraq ties, appear to have developed recently. Iran is hardly known to have seriously voiced its official concerns regarding the 2009 Saudi bombardment of the Houthi fighters and their military bases in Sa'ada – though religious groups condemned the Sana'a government, aided by the Saudis, for massacre of the Shiite Yemenis. In a dramatic shift from that policy Tehran now openly supports the Houthis, with the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei calling Saudi strikes an act of 'genocide that can be prosecuted at international courts'. The 2009 bombing campaign, in fact, pushed the Houthis down to the court of Iran for seeking support to face future onslaughts by the Saudis, with allegations of a series of secret or open meetings held between them in the past months. Yet, the Houthis are known for their independence goal; they want a Yemen free of both Saudi and Iranian influences, and they hardly depend on Iranian military training or equipment supplies. According to an American expert on Yemen, 'The Houthis don't need Iranian weapons. They have plenty of their own. And they don't require military training. They've been fighting Al-Qaeda since at least 2012, and they've been winning'.

The Saudis, who view things through more sectarian prisms, have similarly projected Houthi rebellion as a Shiite attack on Yemen's Sunni-led government under President Hadi, with deep roots to the wider Iran-guided Shiite resurgence in the Middle East. They interpret it as a Saudi duty to purge Islam of corrupt and un-Islamic practices of the 'heretic Shiites', a pejorative term the Saudis disdainfully use for the Shiites in general. So, airstrikes were the right policy choice, they believe. Religiously less obsessed Saudis see it as an attempt to defend Yemen's Arab identity, possibly to be diluted by Iranian influence. Here the missing point is that the Houthis, who belong to the Zaydi sect of Shiite Islam, are also Arabic-speaking people who boast of their Arab identity.

Equally doubtful is the Saudi accusation that the Houthis are promoting a Shiite agenda in Yemen. The Houthis, named after Husayn Al-Houthi, a Shiite legal scholar, who started the Houthi movement in the early 1990s to preach tolerance and peace but his movement gradually turned violent to protest socio-economic and political marginalization of the Zaydis by the Yemeni central government. Nevertheless, the Houthis do not represent the Zaydi elites as a united group; many of them support Yemen's different political factions. They are hardly fighting for promoting Zaydism, nor do their fighters exclusively come from the Zaydi sect. The Houthis recruit fighters from many major Yemeni tribes, based on their funding capacities and quality of military leadership. The fear of a sectarian approach taken by the Zaydis in concert with Shiite Iran sounds unrealistic; it is rather connected to the Saudi and Iranian pursuits of power and dominance in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon where both countries have used sectarian fearmongering on a wider regional scale.

On the theological level, the assumption of an automatic connection between the Houthis-led Zaydi Shiites and

Iranian Shiites is less supported by evidence. Shiite Islam is not a monolithic Islamic sect; there are big differences between its various sub-sects. Mainstream Shiites in Iran and Iraq, also known as *Ithna Ashari* Shiites, believe in and accept the Twelve Imams – the descendants of Ali Ibn Abu Talib, the fourth caliph of Islam (the Shiites do not recognize the first three caliphs – Abu Bakr, Omar Ibn Khatib and Othman as they did not come from the family and blood of the Prophet Muhammad). The Zaydi Shiites broke off from the mainstream Shiites at the fifth Imam and established their own version of Imamate rule, combining elements of religious and secular governance, in northern Yemen in 897 that, with some historical breaks, endured up to 1962, the year of the republican revolution. The Ismaili Shiites, who are primarily found in South Asia and who regard the Aga Khan as their Imam, broke off at the seventh Imam. So, discovering some Iranian fingerprints in every domestic conflict involving the Shiites in the Arab countries may not appear convincing.

The reasons for Saudi airstrikes on Yemen actually stem from what Riyadh expects of Sana'a and what role it should play in the Arabian Peninsula. Historically, Saudi Arabia has treated Yemen as a client state and attempted to dominate it through a policy of divide and rule. Riyadh has sought to maintain a two-tier relationship with Yemen**:** provide economic aid to the Sana'a-based central government and thus keep it dependent, and bankroll and cultivate relationships with tribal sheikhs as a counterweight to the central government. This policy of buying loyalty for generous economic handouts has helped Saudi Arabia to curb Yemen's independent role in foreign affairs or to punish Sana'a whenever it has sought to be independent of Saudi influence. For example, Riyadh expelled thousands of Yemeni workers after Yemen had taken an indecisive position on Saudi-supported US-led war to liberate Kuwait in 1991.

There is a parallel development in Yemen today. The Houthis, who have already fought four wars against the Yemeni central government and another major war against the Saudis in 2009, are independent-minded forces and they want to limit, if not eliminate, Saudi dominance over their homeland. The policy of buying loyalty for economic incentives has so far worked for the Saudis but the Arab Spring put that framework in tatters. The pro-democracy movement, which the Houthis strongly supported, brought down the Ali Abdullah Saleh government in November 2011, and the Houthis managed to secure more seats in the post-Saleh National Dialogue Conference – a political forum created by the pro-democracy forces under Saudi encouragement to debate and introduce political reforms in Yemen. The Arab Spring thus empowered the Houthis and they gradually emerged as a major national political and military force.

Serious problems however erupted when the Houthis took over Sana'a last September, overpowered the Saudi-supported Sunni-dominated Al-Islah party and the Hashid Tribal Federation in eastern Yemen that put Saudi control of Yemeni politics at serious risk. Much to the consternation of the Saudis, the Houthis started moving towards the south, being supported by forces loyal to former President Saleh who was seeking revenge against his opponents in the Hashid Tribal Federation who hastened his downfall, to put more territories under their control, and eventually forced President Hadi to leave Aden for Riyadh. The Saudis no doubt interpreted the Houthi – Saleh connections and the rebels' southward push as a final attempt to completely shut Riyadh out from Yemeni politics or significantly curtail its influence in Sana'a. The air campaign against the Houthis, viewed from this perspective, was a response to effectively limit that possibility.

The doomed military response

The sole objective of the Saudi decision to bomb the Houthi rebels, as clearly as it can be concluded, was to coerce them into submission and accept a political solution backed by the threats of Saudi military muscle. It has not, however, worked. After a long air campaign, the Saudis suddenly declared an unconvincing victory over their Houthi opponents on 22 April 2015. The claim to victory was undercut by the fact that the Houthi rebels did not surrender due to the ferocity of the air offensive, nor did they retreat from the cities, including Sana'a (which they captured from forces loyal to President Hadi**)**. The Houthi leader Abdul-Malik Al-Houthi declared on 19 April: 'Anyone who thinks we will surrender is dreaming'.

Reports soon emerged that the Saudis wound down their air operations under pressure from Iran. Tehran, through a third party, informed Riyadh on 21 April that Houthi rebels had mid-range missiles and anti-aircraft rockets to be used

against Saudi air raids. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif's phone conversations with his US counterpart John Kerry the same day finally resulted in a ceasefire between the Saudis and the Houthis. It is not that the air campaign has totally failed, as it has stopped the Houthi rebels from completely overrunning the southern Yemeni Red Sea port city of Aden; yet, it largely fell short of achieving its stated objectives, which were to seriously downsize Houthi power and to reinstate President Hadi in Sana'a.

Several weaknesses were evident in the Saudi military strategy from the outset. First off, there are lingering questions about the effectiveness of air assaults to achieve the stated purposes of armed hostilities. Recent examples are quite discouraging. The powerful Israeli defense forces' inability to knock out Hamas and Islamic Jihad fighters in Gaza through airstrikes in the summer 2014 war is a recent example. The US bombardment of Islamic State (IS) fighters in Iraq and Syria proved effective in slowing down their advance but ground offensives were required to drive out the IS forces from Kobane in Syria and Tikrit in Iraq. The Saudi air campaign progressed unilaterally without a planned ground offensive to follow and there was little prospect of military success. In many cases the Saudi pilots dropped the US-supplied arms and missiles on civilian populations that quickly bred Yemeni opposition to Saudi air actions, a counterproductive development the Saudis needed to avoid. Secondly, the Saudis, largely haunted by their bad experiences of the 2009 air attacks on the Houthis, have this time assembled a nine-nation coalition to overcome their military shortcomings but it has largely proved ineffective. In 2009 the Saudi armed forces fought against a ragtag Houthi army of several hundred fighters, yet they suffered more than a hundred casualties and lost military equipment to the Houthis, who reportedly captured some Saudi territory along the border and forced large scale Saudi evacuations from the border areas.

Theoretically, the nine-nation military coalition, with logistical support from the US, should be powerful enough to defeat, and possibly uproot, the Houthi fighters but practically it has proved a phony coalition. Saudi Arabia's GCC partners – Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates are militarily insignificant players. Pakistan, beset with multiple domestic and external problems, decided to stay out of the conflict. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, a personal friend of the Saudi royal family, concluded early that the Saudis blundered into an unwinnable war and a possible anti-Houthi ground offensive would result in a quagmire. Additionally, Pakistani military generals were not interested in fighting a war in Yemen while their armed forces were stretched too thin along the borders with Afghanistan in the northwest and India in the northeast.

Similarly, Egypt, militarily the most powerful partner of the Saudi-led coalition, has limited options. The Egyptian army, after unseating the Mohammed Morsi government, has been busy with maintaining domestic order and fighting Islamists in the Sinai desert. Devoid of any insurgency fighting experience in the last few decades, Egypt's armed forces can be expected to have little incentive to fight another war in Yemen. Cairo's last war experience in Yemen in the 1960s in support of the republicans against the royalists, whom Saudi Arabia then supported, was no less than a complete disaster. Without adequate knowledge of the hostile terrain and appropriate training the army soldiers proved ineffective in fighting tribal warriors in Yemen's rugged mountainous areas and suffered a total of 26,000 casualties from 1962 to 1970. That remains a serious disincentive for the Egyptian army to commit ground troops in Yemen again.

Turkey, another coalition partner, is caught between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Ankara, alarmed by the rise of Shiite power in the Middle East, finds itself in league with Sunni Saudi Arabia but its booming economic ties with Iran, particularly energy imports (20 per cent of its natural gas imports come from Iran), has possibly limited Ankara's role to providing logistical support to Riyadh's war effort. Turkey's unsuccessful support for the anti-government rebels in Syria has been another constraint on committing militarily to the Saudi offensive against the Houthis. At the end of the day, Saudi Arabia could count on no major help from its non-GCC coalition partners, and the Saudi army, with an untested upper echelon of military generals, is nowhere close to launching a ground offensive of its own to beat the Houthi rebels in an inhospitable mountainous environment.

The weaknesses in Saudi military efforts to prevent the rise of Houthi power in Yemen are further exacerbated by Riyadh's limitations to circumvent the Houthis politically. The air offensive to resist the Houthis is not enough; the Saudis badly need to build a strong Yemeni political coalition to seriously challenge the Houthis from inside Yemen, like how the US galvanized anti-Saddam forces before invading Iraq in March 2003 or directly funded and organized

the 'Iraq Awakening' movement to defeat the al-Qaeda forces. In reality, the anti-Houthi forces are weak and fragmented; the fugitive President Hadi's political allies, grouped under the al-Islah party, were already routed by the Houthi fighters, denying Riyadh a political arm in Yemen. In contrast, the Houthi leaders showed remarkable political astuteness in courting Sunni tribal leaders and fighters in their march to take over Sana'a, Taiz and other major Yemeni cities. Before taking over Sana'a, they allied with Bani Matar and Khawlan, the two powerful clans who control the gateway to the city; before marching towards the province of Amran, they courted the powerful Banu Suraym tribe. In brief, the Saudi allies in Yemen were on a losing spree and there are limited prospects of a military strike to change the political equations on the ground.

Clearly, the occasional limited halt in airstrikes has produced an uneasy and uncomfortable situation for the Saudis. They are unlikely to accept and live with a Houthi-dominated Yemen. Much however depends on the outcomes of political negotiations between various Yemeni factions the UN has been attempting to facilitate. Two things are obvious: a) the Saudi political and tribal allies are unlikely to make a strong political comeback reminiscent of the past years; and b) the Houthi rise to power is a reality that should be reckoned with, though they, as a minority group (some 30% of the total population of Yemen), cannot expect to rule Yemen alone. The Saudis would continue to perceive the Houthis as powerful political and military opponents and feel the need to keep them at bay either through economic pressures or through the use of force. Occasional resumptions of airstrikes against the Houthis, even after the lull declared on 22 April and the five-day humanitarian pause that went into effect on 12 May, exactly speak of that. To put it succinctly, the Houthis are a serious headache for the Saudis and this issue will keep them bogged down in Yemen both politically and militarily until developments unfold to suit their interests.

In contrast to the Saudis, Iran stands to gain much from the conflict in Yemen. Against all regional odds, Iran has politically and diplomatically supported the Houthi cause, apparently to gain a foothold in the southern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, a point the Houthi leaders would hardly forget. This factor is likely to bring them closer to each other, solidify their future ties and may convince them to work jointly to ward off future Saudi pressures. The Houthis would need Iran for their own interests, and Iran would need the Houthis to further check Saudi influence in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. For so long, Iran had no strong presence in the Arabian Peninsula other than strong bilateral relations with Oman; the Iran – Houthi connections would probably fill that vacuum and extends Iranian sphere of influence from Beirut to Sana'a via Damascus and Baghdad. This is likely to hamstring Saudi security and foreign policies.

Summing up the main points

This short analysis, to conclude, has highlighted a series of points. Firstly, political problems can hardly be resolved through military means. Saudi airstrikes, intended to downgrade the Houthis' military capabilities and stop them from gaining political ascendance in Yemen, were a defective response, a response that has not yielded the desired results until now. Secondly, the anti-Houthi coalition of nine Arab and Muslim states that the Saudis originally put together proved Riyadh's diplomatic capacities to wield influence in regional and global politics**,** but in terms of hard military value the coalition largely fell apart. With the backing away of Pakistan from the coalition and the unwillingness of Egypt to commit ground troops, Riyadh was alone left in the lurch with little determination to press ahead with ground attacks to finally finish the Houthis off. Thirdly, the survival of the Houthis and their growing political influence in Yemen is a serious constraint on Saudi policy towards and traditional influence in Yemen. This is a significant loss for the Saudis for which they probably have no stomach to digest. This explains why Riyadh is most likely to politically and militarily get stuck in Yemen over a longer period of time. Fourthly, Iran, through a consolidation of its ties with the Houthis, seems to seek to lessen Saudi influence in Yemen. That means a further emboldened Iran exerting more influence from Beirut to Sana'a.

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