

Viewpoints
No. 74

Saudi Arabia Forms a Pan-Arab Sunni Alliance Against the Houthis

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Saudi Arabia has reacted to the attempt by Houthi Shi'ite rebels in Yemen to take over the entire country with Iranian backing by forming for the first time a pan-Arab Sunni military alliance against the Houthis. The Arab coalition has begun raining bombs down on Houthi positions across Yemen, and Saudi Arabia has amassed 150,000 troops along the Yemeni border. Now the Saudis and its Arab partners must decide whether and when to put "boots on the ground" in a belated attempt to stop the Houthi takeover.

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Saudi Arabia's decision to commit its military might to preventing a total takeover of Yemen by Houthi rebels represents a watershed moment in its struggles with Iran both for regional dominance and to halt a creeping Iranian encirclement of the kingdom.

This is not the first time the Saudis have committed their air power, and perhaps soon their troops, too, to aiding their Sunni allies in Yemen against the Houthis who belong to a Shi'ite sect drawing inspiration and military support from Shi'ite Iran. But the Saudi intervention is taking on far larger dimensions than ever before and turning into a broad alliance of Sunni nations against Iran that could become a model for future Arab military interventions to combat Iranian encroachment elsewhere in the Arab world.

The Saudis have announced that 10 Sunni states are involved in the anti-Houthi operation, including four of the five other monarchies belonging to the Gulf Cooperation Council (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) but also Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, and even the non-Arab Sunni nation of Pakistan.

Such an Arab military coalition was formed during the 1990-91 Gulf War and again to a lesser extent last year in the 60-nation coalition established to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). But both of those coalitions were put together and led primarily by the United States, with Saudi Arabia acting as co-sponsor of the first one that successfully drove Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army out of Kuwait.

This time, Saudi Arabia has taken the lead in forming the military alliance of Arab nations with the United States playing a secondary role offering intelligence and logistical support only, at least so far. We are seeing Saudi Arabia's debut as a military power willing to take the lead in the use of force beyond its borders.

Just how far Saudi Arabia and its Sunni Arab allies are willing to go in their military intervention in Yemen is unclear. Thus far, they have committed their air forces to widespread attacks on Houthi positions pretty much across the entire country from the capital of Sana'a and the Saudi-Yemeni border in the north to around Aden in the far south. Whether they will risk putting "boots on the ground" to help restore ousted President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi to power remains to be seen. Hadi fled Aden and arrived in the Saudi capital of Riyadh on Thursday, March 26.

Saudi Arabia has moved 150,000 troops to the Yemeni border, and Pakistan disclosed that it is considering a Saudi request to send some of its troops to the kingdom. The Associated Press on Thursday, March 26 quoted Egyptian military and security officials in Cairo as saying a ground assault by Egyptian, Saudi, and other forces would take place after airstrikes had sufficiently weakened Houthi positions.

The Saudi ambassador to Washington, Adel al-Jubeir, said at the press conference on the evening of Wednesday, March 25 that Saudi Arabia was ready to do "whatever it takes in order to protect the legitimate government of Yemen from falling." But his written statement

described the coalition's military intervention as one "limited in nature." The official Saudi statement on Thursday, March 26 announcing the initiation of air attacks on Houthi positions quoted various UN and Arab League documents regarding the right to self-defense in order to justify "instant support by all necessary means" in the face of the Houthi threat to Yemen's security, stability, and sovereignty. The Houthis had even become a threat to regional and international security.

Restoring President Hadi to power in Sana'a at this late stage of the conflict would likely require of Saudi Arabia and its allies a major military operation, of very probable long duration. Forces still loyal to him are scattered among a few units of the fragmented Yemeni army and some tribes. Hadi himself had been holed up in Aden, the country's second largest city in the far south. But even there, he had been fighting supporters of his predecessor, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has allied himself with the Houthis in an apparent attempt to make his own comeback to the presidency.

Not only may it be too late, but the Saudi record of intervention in the dangerously convoluted politics of that unforgiving country has been one more of failure than success.

Yemen, a poor, tribally-segmented country with a weak state, has long been a thorn in the side of the Saudi kingdom that keeps drawing blood. Yemeni leaders have again and again supported its enemies or been too weak to prevent them from operating from there even while the Saudis have poured billions of dollars into Yemeni coffers. Yemen supported Iraq against Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War of 1990-91, sided with the Muslim Brotherhood which the Saudis labeled a "terrorist group," and proved helpless to stop al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula from making Yemen its headquarters after it was driven out of Saudi Arabia in the mid-2000s.

Saudi rulers have switched endlessly in their support from one leader, faction, or tribe to another in an attempt to maintain stability and a friendly regime. They have backed both the unity and division of the country in pursuit of that objective. In 1994, they even supported a rebellion in the south against a united Yemen and sought in vain to gain U.S. backing for the re-division of the country.

For years, Saudi rulers supported warily the now deposed leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, but then led the Arab effort in 2011-12 to replace him with Hadi to quell the uprising triggered by the Arab Spring. Now Hadi is being overthrown by the Houthis with whom the Saudis fought a short, bloody border war in late 2009. The Saudi military did not distinguish itself in that encounter and lost 133 troops as it sought to reclaim territory the Houthis had seized inside the kingdom.

The history of Saudi-Houthi relations illustrates all the complexities, and the ephemeral nature, of Yemeni politics in which the Saudis have long played a prominent role. The Houthis are Zaidis, a Shi'ite offshoot which helped to attract Iran to its cause, first for local autonomy and then for its seizure of Sanaa last September. They account for about 35 percent of the country's population of 26 million and are collectively called Houthis after the name of the family that has led seven uprisings since 2004. Their current leader is 33-year-old Abdul Malik al-Houthi, a reclusive leader who resides in the Houthi stronghold in Saada.

Ironically, the Houthis were better known before 1962 as royalist followers of the 1,000-year-old Zaidi imamate whose last imam, Muhammad al-Badr, had strong Saudi backing in his losing struggle against Yemeni republicans backed by Egypt's late Gamal Abdel Nasser. To Saudi dismay, the United States was one of the first countries to recognize the Yemen Arab Republic shortly after the outbreak of war in 1962, while the Saudis continued to support the Zaidi royalists until their cause collapsed in 1970.

The fall of Yemen to the Houthis comes at a time when Saudi Arabia is already deeply upset with what it regards as yet another pending victory for Tehran, namely its negotiations with six world powers led by the United States over its nuclear program. The talks are aimed at preventing Iran from building a nuclear bomb for at least the next decade, but it will still be allowed to continue enriching uranium in preparation. On Tuesday, March 24, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal vented his government's condemnation of the likely results of the negotiations, warning they would give Tehran an "undeserved deal" even while it continued its interventionist policies in Arab countries like Yemen.



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