Rolling Thunder? 
Saudi Arabia Discovers the Limits of Air Power

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Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies have been bombing Yemen relentlessly with critical American support for three months now—yet this air campaign has had little effect on their foes, the Iranian-backed Houthis who still control most of the country. The Arab coalition is facing the same dilemma as the United States in Iraq and Syria: what to do when overwhelming air power fails to achieve political objectives because of an acute deficit of local support to change the balance of power on the ground.
Three months of daily bombings of Yemen by a Saudi-led coalition to oust from power Yemeni rebels supported by Iran has had no effect so far other than to produce a nation-wide humanitarian disaster, 2,500 deaths, and the expansion of the Islamic State onto Yemeni soil. As a result, Saudi Arabia now finds itself pondering the same dilemma as the United States is in Iraq and Syria: what to do when overwhelming air power fails to achieve political objectives, and there is no desire or will to put boots on the ground.

Washington and Riyadh are close partners in two coalitions simultaneously. The former is leading an air campaign to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The latter is in a similar endeavor to defeat Iran’s allies in Yemen and restore the government recognized internationally as the only legitimate one. Both coalitions find themselves without sufficient allies on the battlefield to accomplish their respective goals.

In Yemen, the United States has been providing critical targeting intelligence and logistics, allowing 180 warplanes from nine Arab countries to mount a daily bombing campaign on Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and allied forces loyal to the former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The Saudi coalition is seeking to return the government of former President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to power. But its tribal allies inside Yemen have failed so far to mobilize to take back any of the major cities from Houthi control or to “liberate” any territory.

The United States faces a similar dilemma of finding sufficient support among Iraq’s splintered Shi’ite, Sunni, and Kurdish populations to even seriously degrade the Islamic State, whose self-declared caliphate stretches across most of western Iraq. In Syria, it has also failed to find, train, and arm sufficient “moderate” rebels to make any difference in weakening ISIL or other al-Qaeda affiliated rebel factions.

The Saudi-led air campaign war that began on March 26 has not changed the lay of the battlefield or the determination of the Iranian-backed Houthis and their allies to hold on to their gains. A first UN-sponsored attempt to bring the warring parties together (June 15-19 in Geneva) failed to even get them in the same room or agree on a short-term cease-fire to allow emergency relief supplies into the war-ravaged nation. While opponents of the Houthis threw shoes and hurled insults at their delegates in Geneva, the Saudi-led coalition continued to relentlessly bomb their positions in Yemen.

The Obama administration had been seeking a way out of the deepening Yemeni quagmire, first by holding secret talks with Houthi representatives in Oman and then backing the UN talks in Geneva. Now it must decide whether to put more pressure on the Saudis to back down, and what effect this might have on the willingness of the Saudis and their Arab allies to continue participating in the American-led air war against ISIL.

While the United States and Saudi Arabia have enjoyed decades of military and security cooperation, the truth is they differ widely in the priorities motivating their respective air campaigns. For the Saudis, flaunting their first major projection of military power in the region,
the overriding issue in Yemen is proving they can stand up to Iran and its new-found Houthi allies there.

For the Obama administration, the Yemeni war is a distraction from its immediate goal of reaching a deal with Iran over curbing its nuclear program by June 30. In April, Washington sent seven U.S. warships to block Iran from sending arms and relief supplies to the Houthis. But otherwise it has worked to keep the Iranian challenge to Saudi Arabia in Yemen from derailing a nuclear agreement.

The administration’s second priority in Yemen is combating al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which it considers the most serious threat to the American homeland. AQAP has benefited from the Yemeni chaos to extend its presence and seize control of the provincial seaside capital of Mukalla on the Gulf of Aden.

Indicative of the U.S. focus on AQAP has been the persistence of U.S. drone attacks throughout the Saudi air war—six since it began on March 26, resulting in the deaths of at least 22 al-Qaeda militants according to the calculations of the New America Foundation, a Washington-based think tank. Foremost among the dead was AQAP leader Nasir al-Wuhayshi.

Paradoxically, the Houthi rebels are on the side of the United States in viewing AQAP and the Islamic State as their main enemies. This is because both are Sunni extremist groups that regard the Houthis, who belong to an offshoot of Shi’ism, as apostates. In the midst of the Geneva “peace talks,” agents of the Islamic State carried out terrorist attacks on Houthi mosques and its headquarters in the Yemeni capital, Sana’a.

The Obama administration has nonetheless felt obliged to show Saudi Arabia and its allies its support for their Yemeni venture, partly to maintain their support for the U.S-led air campaign against ISIL. But here again, priorities are different. The Saudi coalition is focused on the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom they regard as the root cause of the spread of Islamic extremism throughout the region. The Obama administration, on the other hand, remains fixated on combating the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in Syria as well as Iraq.

Thus, the answer to the question of what is to be done in Yemen is vastly complicated by conflicting U.S. and Saudi appreciation of what is at stake and the failure to share a common notion of priorities there or in Syria and Iraq. This conflict will likely worsen now if the Saudis decide to escalate their involvement in the Yemeni civil war.

Signs indicate this escalation is about to happen. The Saudis are providing military training for thousands of Yemeni tribesmen and preparing for a major effort to drive the Houthis out of Aden, the main city in the south where Hadi’s government first took refuge after losing Sana’a in February. Whether the Obama administration will back such an escalation of the fighting remains to be seen.

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Designed by Kendra Heideman
Middle East Program
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