

Viewpoints
No. 78

Rolling Thunder? Saudi Arabia Discovers the Limits of Air Power

David B. Ottaway
Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center

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.

June 2015

Middle East Program





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.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

Viewpoints Series

Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule

Viewpoints No. 1 (April 2012) by David Ottaway

Fostering the Next Generation

Viewpoints No. 2 (April 2012) by Moushira Khattab

Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections

Viewpoints No. 3 (May 2012) by David Ottaway

Syrian Refugees: Lessons from Other Conflicts and Possible Policies

Viewpoints No. 4 (updated August 2012) by Rochelle A. Davis

Morocco's Islamists: In Power Without Power

Viewpoints No. 5 (August 2012) by David Ottaway

The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?

Viewpoints No. 6 (August 2012) by Roberto Toscano, Moushira Khattab, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, and Daniel Brumberg

Iran is Reversing its Population Policy

Viewpoints No. 7 (August 2012) by Farzaneh Roudi

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women

Viewpoints No. 8 (October 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

The Uncertain Fate of U.S.-Egyptian Relations

Viewpoints No. 9 (November 2012) by David Ottaway

The Demons Besieging Lebanon: Iran's Tighter Grip

Viewpoints No. 10 (November 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Change in the Winds?

Viewpoints No. 11 (November 2012) by Shaul Bakhash

Has the Arab Spring Lived Up to Expectations?

Viewpoints No. 12 (December 2012) by Various Authors

Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation

Viewpoints No. 13 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

In 2013, Rise of the Right in Elections Across the Mideast

Viewpoints No. 14 (January 2013) by Robin Wright

Women's Rights Under Egypt's Constitutional Disarray

Viewpoints No. 15 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Repression's Diminishing Returns: The Future of Politics in Egypt

Viewpoints No. 16 (January 2013) by Joshua Stacher

Mali: The Time for Dithering is Over

Viewpoints No. 17 (January 2013) by David Ottaway

Iran's Pivotal Presidential Election

Viewpoints No. 18 (January 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Young Saudis and The Kingdom's Future

Viewpoints No. 19 (February 2013) by Caryle Murphy

Sanctions and Medical Supply Shortages in Iran

Viewpoints No. 20 (February 2013) by Siamak Namazi

The Nuclear Issue: Why is Iran Negotiating?

Viewpoints No. 21 (February 2013) by Bijan Khajepour, Alireza Nader, Michael Adler

The Syrian Refugee Crisis is Pushing Lebanon to the Brink

Viewpoints No. 22 (February 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Resistible Rise of Islamist Parties

Viewpoints No. 23 (March 2013) by Marina Ottaway

As Islamists stumble in Egypt and Tunisia, the Arab Spring turns wintery

Viewpoints No. 24 (March 2013) by Adeed Dawisha

Violence Unsettles Tunisia's Democratic Transition

Viewpoints No. 25 (April 2013) by David Ottaway

Learning Politics in Tunisia

Viewpoints No. 26 (April 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Morocco: "Advanced Decentralization" Meets the Sahara Autonomy Initiative

Viewpoints No. 27 (May 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani's Surprising Election

Viewpoints No. 28 (June 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Lebanon's Existential Threats

Viewpoints No. 29 (June 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges of the New Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani

Viewpoints No. 30 (June 2013) by Various Authors

Egypt: Islamist Ascent, Islamist Descent

Viewpoints No. 31 (July 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Mohamed ElBaradei From Vienna to Cairo: A Transition

Viewpoints No. 32 (July 2013) by Michael Adler

Can Rouhani Resolve Iran's Economic Conundrum?

Viewpoints No. 33 (July 2013) by Bijan Khajepour

Hizbullah's Roll of the Dice in South Lebanon

Viewpoints No. 34 (August 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis

Viewpoints No. 35 (August 2013) by Jubin Goodarzi

Upcoming UN Meeting Revives Hope for U.S.-Iran Dialogue

Viewpoints No. 36 (September 2013) by Barbara Slavin

Back to the Drawing Boards

Viewpoints No. 37 (September 2013) by Nathan J. Brown

The U.S. Administration's Policy in Iraq

Viewpoints No. 38 (September 2013) by Joseph Sassoon

American Policy in Lebanon: Stabilization Through Dissociation

Viewpoints No. 39 (September 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran's Rouhani Puts U.S.-Saudi Ties to the Test
Viewpoints No. 40 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

U.S. Policy toward Syria: Making the Best of a Bad Situation?
Viewpoints No. 41 (October 2013) by Mark N. Katz

American Policy in the Maghreb: Counterterrorism is Not Enough
Viewpoints No. 42 (October 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Tunisia's Islamist-Led Democracy Founders
Viewpoints No. 43 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

Confrontation Over Iran's Nuclear Program
Viewpoints No. 44 (November 2013) by Michael Adler

Breaking Taboos
Viewpoints No. 45 (November 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Iraq's Kurdistan Takes a Giant Step Toward Independence
Viewpoints No. 46 (December 2013) by David Ottaway

The Egyptian Constitution: Mapping Where Power Lies
Viewpoints No. 47 (December 2013) by Marina Ottaway

A Dream Constitution
Viewpoints No. 48 (December 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Can the Iranian Nuclear Issue be Resolved?
Viewpoints No. 49 (January 2014) by Bijan Khajepour

The Hague Tribunal and the Hariri Assassination
Viewpoints No. 50 (January 2014) by Amal Mudallali

Egypt's Referendum: The Constitution is not the Issue
Viewpoints No. 51 (January 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Reflections on Iran's Tumultuous Revolution: 35 Years Later
Viewpoints No. 52 (February 2014) by Shaul Bakhash

Iraq: Tackling Corruption and Sectarianism is More Critical than the Outcome of Elections
Viewpoints No. 53 (March 2014) by Joseph Sassoon

Iranian Nuclear Talks Plow Ahead
Viewpoints No. 54 (March 2014) by Michael Adler

Egypt: The Closing of the Political Space
Viewpoints No. 55 (June 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani: Mixed Bag One Year Later
Viewpoints No. 56 (June 2014) by Shaul Bakhash

Lebanon without a President: Can Lebanon Weather the Neighborhood Storm?
Viewpoints No. 57 (June 2014) by Basem Shabb

The Jordanian Regime and the Muslim Brotherhood: A Tug of War
Viewpoints No. 58 (July 2014) by Tareq Al Naimat

Turkey after Erdogan's Non-Victory
Viewpoints No. 59 (August 2014) by Henri J. Barkey

Barbarians: ISIS's Mortal Threat to Women
Viewpoints No. 60 (August 2014) by multiple authors

Rouhani and the Potential Failure of Nuclear Talks
Viewpoints No. 61 (September 2014) by Farideh Farhi

A New Chapter in the Tangled U.S.-Saudi Relationship
Viewpoints No. 62 (September 2014) by David B. Ottaway

We Bomb ISIL: Then What?
Viewpoints No. 63 (September 2014) by Marina Ottaway

The Coming Tunisian Elections: What Will Be the Role of Women?
Viewpoints No. 64 (October 2014) by Lilia Labidi

A Bloodless Transition: Tunisia's Legislative Elections
Viewpoints No. 65 (November 2014) by Robert Worth

Iran and the Syrian and Iraqi Crises
Viewpoints No. 66 (November 2014) by Jubin Goodarzi

What Next For Iran and the P5+1
Viewpoints No. 67 (November 2014) by multiple authors

Saudi King Abdullah: An Assessment
Viewpoints No. 68 (January 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Egypt's Fight Against FGM: Is There Hope After All?
Viewpoints No. 69 (January 2015) by Moushira Khattab

Mohammed bin Nayef: Washington's New Favorite Saudi Prince
Viewpoints No. 70 (January 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Forming the New Tunisian Government: "Relative Majority" and the Reality Principle
Viewpoints No. 71 (February 2015) by Lilia Labidi

Is Tunisia's Moderate Center in Danger of Collapse?
Viewpoints No. 72 (March 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Elusive as Ever: The State of Iranian-Russian Cooperation
Viewpoints No. 73 (March 2015) by Mark N. Katz

Saudi Arabia Forms a Pan-Arab Sunni Alliance Against the Houthis
Viewpoints No. 74 (March 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Watch Out Washington, the Saudi Hawks Are in Ascendancy
Viewpoints No. 75 (April 2015) by David B. Ottaway

Stark Choice in Iraq
Viewpoints No. 76 (May 2015) by Marina Ottaway

Can a Nuclear Deal Help Iran's Young Labor Force?
Viewpoints No. 77 (June 2015) by Farzaneh Roudi

Edited by Kendra Heideman, Julia Craig Romano, and
Jill Ricotta

Designed by Kendra Heideman
Middle East Program

Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars