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Implications of the Saudi Military Intervention in Yemen



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Yemen has been the Achilles heel for Saudi Arabia throughout its history. Though it has only a quarter of Saudi Arabia's land area its population is almost as large. In addition to this the Ottoman Turks and the British never really controlled Yemen as a result of which it has failed to develop strong bureaucratic institutions resulting in continued turbulence and turmoil in the country.¹ Saudi Arabia has persistent fears of the turmoil spreading in its territory, threatening its regime. It is precisely because of this that Riyadh goes at great lengths to ensure a friendly regime in Sanaa.

The current turmoil in Yemen was triggered by the Houthi successes in the country, in which the rebels supporting the former President Ali Abdullah Saleh managed to capture the capital Sanaa in September 2014. The internationally recognised and Saudi allied President AbdRabbu Mansour Hadi had to escape the country as a result of the decisive gains by the Houthis who proceeded South near Aden after successes in Sanaa. The Houthis are considered to be a proxy of Iran as it follows Zaydi sect

Key Points

1. The Saudi intervention in Yemen is purely out of geopolitical concerns, aimed at countering the alleged Iranian threat, it also provides a good excuse to divert domestic attention which is dissatisfied with the regime in Riyadh
2. Limited success of previous bombing operations, insufficient troops, difficult terrain, and lack of experience in urban combat pose serious challenges at the operational level.
3. The actual coalition presence on ground only comprises of troops from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain exposing the failure of Saudi Arabia to put together a united Sunni front.
4. Absence of any strong unifying force, unfolding humanitarian crisis, North- South divide, and sectarian issues makes a resolution between the political rivals difficult.
5. Al Qaida in Arabian Peninsula is the single largest beneficiary of the conflict as it has not been targeted by the coalition strikes and the current conditions will further strengthen its hold on the country.

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Implications of the Saudi Military ...

of Shia Islam. A pro- Tehran regime in its backyard thus poses imminent threat to Saudi Arabia resulting in its military intervention in Yemen.

Pretext of involvement

The Saudi excuse for outright military intervention in Yemen had been to enforce 'political reconciliation

Yemeni territory to infiltrate into Saudi Arabia to carryout subversion and unrest in the country.

- The Iranian threat provides a good excuse to divert domestic attention which is dissatisfied with the Saudi royal family.
- It provides a good opportunity to strengthen the united Sunni front in the region.



Source: [https://www.google.co.in/maps/place/Bab-el Mandeb/@18.2155931,44.739583,5z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x1618efd6a345e341:0xf4918a358259b0f0](https://www.google.co.in/maps/place/Bab-el+Mandeb/@18.2155931,44.739583,5z/data=!4m2!3m1!1s0x1618efd6a345e341:0xf4918a358259b0f0)

through coercion' and implementation of UNSC Resolution 2216 (2015) and 2201 (2015).² But actual cause of intervention may be

Phases of Saudi Intervention

Phase 1: Op Decisive Storm

- The alleged Iranian presence in Yemen poses a serious Geo-strategic challenge, as it can threaten the narrow straits of Bab- Al Mandeb like the Straits of Hormuz. Iran thus will be in a commanding position of the two strategic chokepoints of the region. It can also use the

The Saudi led coalition comprising of air forces from Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Sudan, Egypt³ began their military intervention on 26 March 2015 when it launched *Op Decisive Storm*, an intense aerial bombing campaign coupled with naval blockade against the Houthi rebels aimed

at removing the threats to Saudi Arabia and the neighbouring countries. A total of 2415 sorties were flown with the following objectives⁴.

- Control of Yemeni air space
- Destroying the Houthis anti air assets as well as command and control centres, logistics bases, supply networks, ammunition depot etc.

The operation was called off unexpectedly in April 2015 and resulted in more than 1200 people killed as per the UN report.⁵ It also caused a lot of collateral damage to various civil infrastructure including UN offices that were also targeted. These figures did not include the casualties from clashes between the Houthis and Pro- government forces near Abyan, Dhale, Aden and Lahjin the south.⁶

Phase 2: Op Renewal of Hope

This was the second phase of the intervention and had certain broad goals like reinstating the government in exile, protection of civilians, fight against terrorism, evacuation of foreign nationals and providing humanitarian aid.⁷ The aerial attacks however continued. This phase achieved relatively limited political gains as the humanitarian organisations continued to struggle to cope with the unfolding crisis.⁸ Along with the intensive bombardment of major cities like Sanaa and Aden, the coalition troops also deployed special operations forces⁹ which tried to reverse the Houthi gains with the assistance of the anti- Houthi militias comprising the Shabwa and Abyan tribes and the Lahj and Yafe tribes who supported President Hadi.¹⁰ No regular troops were officially fielded in this phase of the involvement.

Phase 3: Op Golden Arrow

The Saudi coalition forces refuted the claims of its presence in ground offensive until the missile attack which killed approximately 60 soldiers in the Yemeni province of Marib, East of Sanaa. The

missile had hit an ammunition depot triggering a blast that led to fatalities. The presence of the troops and the ammunition depot indicates that the plan for a ground offensive was at an advanced stage. The need of a ground offensive may also have been because of the realization of the Saudi government of the limitation of the aerial campaigns in completely destroying the Houthi's offensive capabilities as well as failure of the anti- Houthi coalition to gain ground.

There were reports of approximately 10,000 coalition troops present in Yemen for the ground offensive. The coalition on the ground was claimed to consist of troops from Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan as well as Yemeni forces loyal to Hadi and trained by Saudi Arabia. However a brief look at the casualties sustained and the limited information on deployment available in public domain indicate the presence of only the Emirati, Saudi and Bahraini troops on the ground. Bulk of Saudi forces is primarily concentrated on the Saudi- Yemeni border. Despite the troop pledge the troops from other countries have not yet arrived on the field.

The operation involved a two pronged attack from the north- east and south. The attack from Marib formed the north- eastern route of attacks.

An armoured brigade comprising of one battalion of BMP- 3's, at least two battalions of the Leclerc tanks, G6 self propelled howitzers and Agrab mortar carriers were successfully carried out an amphibious landing in Aden.¹¹ The force moved to capture Al Anad Air base which fell in the first week of August. From Al Anad a successful assault was subsequently launched on the Ta'izz governorate in the south. This formed the part of the 'southern hook' in an attempt to capture the capital city, Sanaa.

The coalition forces certainly enjoy an overwhelming technological advantage over the Houthis and its

allies, yet the ground operation is riddled with many problems which may end up in the Saudified coalition forces ending up with a 'bleeding nose'. Some of the inherent problems with the ground invasion are as follows

militias many of which are armed and trained by the Saudis.¹³

- **Terrain:** The terrain in the north, especially around the capital is mountainous. The Sanaa governorate terrain is distributed between high



Source: <http://www.moonofalabama.org/images4/yemen-sitmap150807.jpg> (Accessed on 13th September 2015)

- **Limited Success of Previous Operations:** There was negligible difference in conduct of military operations *Decisive Storm* and *Renewal of Hope*. The repeated coalition air assaults have certainly degraded the war making potential of the Houthis but have failed to completely destroy it. This was evident after the successful missile attack at Marib and the continuous missile and rocket attacks into southern the Saudi Arabia.¹²
- **Insufficient Troops:** Despite the overwhelming bombardment campaign the coalition has managed to amass roughly 10,000 troops on ground for Op *Golden Arrow*. Considering the scale of operations and the post conflict stabilization responsibilities, the force will have to undertake, the numbers are grossly insufficient. This means the coalition will have to initiate a troop surge or rely on the local

mountains and fertile agricultural valleys. The highlands are broadly classified as Western Highlands and Central Highlands with mountains ranging between 3666 m- 1817 m above sea level.¹⁴ The capital city itself is located at an altitude of 2200 m above sea level.¹⁵ This greatly limits any armoured or mechanised thrusts in the region. The Houthis are familiar with the terrain owing to their previous engagements against the government forces thus enjoying an upper hand.

- **Combat Experience of the Coalition Troops:** The last major engagement in combat for the Gulf coalition troops was during operation Desert Storm in 1991. Further, with an attack on Sanaa imminent, the defenders have fortified their defences and are expected to

be dug in. The operations in the capital city will also involve extensive urban combat and lack of experience in such a setup poses some serious questions on the efficiency of the coalition forces.

- **The Role of Media:** The role of media is crucial for both the coalition as well as the Houthis. Due to lack of overseas combat missions in the past by the Arab armies, there is a likelihood of a low threshold for accepting casualties, which will have a direct impact on public support for the military operations in Yemen. Under such circumstances the coalition leadership will portray the War as a means to counter the Iranian presence in their neighbourhood, thus making Iran the red herring of the region. The Houthis have regularly released videos of destroyed coalition tanks and equipment aiming to portray that the Saudi campaign is not going as planned which may cause public dissatisfaction in the coalition countries, ultimately leading to withdrawal of troops. Thus the media will play an important role in sustenance of Saudi led mission in Yemen.

Challenges for the Houthis

The Houthis also face many of the problems similar to those faced by the coalition forces.

- **Technological Inferiority:** The Saudi led coalition has fielded state of the art air, naval and ground assets from its arsenal which is vastly superior to that of the Houthis. This factor has to a degree favoured the coalition.
- **Too many Opponents:** The Houthis and its allies face strong opposition from the Southern separatist movement, Al Qaida, other Sunni tribes¹⁶ and the Saudi led Coalition which in the long run may eventually succeed in pushing back the Houthi fighters from their positions.
- **Sustainability of Alliance:** The Houthis which

have no experience of governance and will primarily rely on Saleh to run the country and will be content with some special privileges offered by his government. The sustainability of the alliance between the forces loyal to Saleh and the Houthis is thus crucial from the Houthis point of view. Thus the possibility of Saudi Arabia trying to woo Saleh, its former ally by offering some generous political, military or diplomatic support cannot be completely denied. It may result in the end to the alliance.

Implications for Yemen

- **Status of Non State Actors:** Throughout the campaign, the coalition has systematically avoided targeting the Al Qaida affiliate and in the event of lack of a strong government the group is likely to benefit as has been the case before. Currently Al Qaida is the single largest beneficiary of the conflict as it has not been targeted by the coalition and the current conditions will enable it to further strengthen its hold on the country. Suicide attacks by ISIS in the capital signals the arrival of the terror group in the country and there are many factions who may pledge allegiance to the group or join its ranks in the civil war that may follow.
- **Governance and Rehabilitation:** Before the escalation of conflict Yemen was already one of the most impoverished states in the region. The extensive aerial bombardments coupled with urban combat that has already taken place and is likely to take place in the coming months thus pose a serious challenge of rehabilitation and governance. The OHCHR as on September 2015 has already documented 6,631 civilian casualties which included 2,112 dead and 4,519 wounded.¹⁷ The war has triggered a humanitarian crisis reaching catastrophic scale as 84% i.e. 21.1 million out of the total population of 25 million being in need of basic needs.¹⁸ Prices of food and fuel have

sky rocketed, and there have been severe cases of malnutrition, internal displacement etc. All combined together pose an uphill task from the point of view of governance. In addition to this the cost of rebuilding and bringing the economy back in shape poses some serious challenge.

Regional Implications

As the conflict progresses the Saudi failure of a united Sunni front is clearly evident. Despite the initial troop pledges, with the exception of UAE the troops contributed by the coalition countries are negligible. The casualties suffered on ground in Yemen clearly highlight the fact. The actual 'coalition attacks' are thus carried out by Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain. The 'token' force presence from other countries only has a symbolic value. The failure of Pakistan to contribute troops in Yemen may have an impact on the relations between Riyadh and Islamabad.

A coalition success in Yemen might provide a greater impetus to the aggressive and 'pre-emptive' foreign policy adopted by the Kingdom since the Arab Spring. It will also encourage it to undertake ventures in other areas in the region where it faces the Iranian challenge namely Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. Even on the domestic front the success is a much needed outcome as it allow Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al- Saud to enhance his standing. The Saudi government enjoys strong support for its intervention in Yemen from its middle and lower class.

If the conflict continues to drag on indefinitely or into a stalemate Riyadh may attempt to create a divide in the alliance between the Houthis and Saleh by wooing the later, its former ally, in return for economic, political or diplomatic concessions. Concurrently, the Saudis are likely to continue

their support to the anti- Houthi factions with arms and funding to escalate the conflict or at least keep the Houthis engaged militarily. The level of violence is not expected to come down for some time to come.

Conclusion

The Saudi military intervention in Yemen is purely out of geopolitical concerns which emerge out of the Iranian presence in the country. The intervention has however exposed the hollowness of the Sunni front which it intends to put up to counter the threat posed by Iran. The outcome of this direct intervention will, to a considerable extent determines the future of Saudi Arabia's military engagements in the region.

More importantly poor governance, extensive bombing campaigns and the collateral damage to civilian life and property, lack of credible response from international organisations like the UN has further alienated the Yemeni population. This makes perfect breeding ground for radical religious ideologies. Al Qaida which has emerged as the single largest beneficiary from the conflict has a much better chance of strengthening its control over the country.

Eventually, the Houthi threat will subside as it faces overwhelming odds at various fronts. However, the main threat lies in the fact that the conflict in Yemen has unleashed centrifugal forces which will further destabilise the already volatile region, giving rise to forces which will be more threatening than Al Qaida and ISIS. Keeping in mind the massive scale of destruction, the government which will ultimately come to power in Yemen faces an uphill task of rehabilitation and providing a stable government. Hence, co-operation from the regional, extra-regional and international organisations like the UN will be crucial

... Intervention in Yemen

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