

“A Saudi Perspective”

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Abstract

The Yemeni Civil War, and subsequent Saudi led military intervention, is a conflict whose foundations manifest in the current regional tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. With the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and ensuing perception of a power vacuum left by the United States through its perceived withdrawal from the region and eagerness to work with Tehran, has helped frame a situation where Saudi Arabia feels obligated to take a hands on approach to its own foreign policy. Iranian interference into the traditional Saudi sphere of influence in Yemen, the growth of Sunni extremism in the form of Al Qaida and Islamic State within Yemen, and Yemeni civil war has moved Saudi Arabia into action in order to preserve the state against an existential threat. The Saudi response has been one of leadership amongst fellow Sunni regimes in the Arabian Peninsula and wider Sunni world, leading a united front both politically and militarily to counter the growing instability and conflict in Yemen in what is ultimately a pitted battle for regional dominance in the Middle East. This paper will attempt to address the Saudi Arabian reasoning behind its involvement in Yemen, the Saudi view on Iranian involvement in Yemen through the proxy Houthis, and how the Yemen issue reflects Saudi actions in the wider context of the current Sunni-Shiite power struggle in the Middle East.

The tensions between the regional powers of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are currently manifest through direct conflict and proxy-warfare in the territories of what are formerly Yemen and Syria. These conflicts bring to the fore not only a modern day battle for regional dominance in an arguably post-American Middle East, but also the re-ignition of the Sunni vs. Shiite rivalry in form of Saudi Arabia and Iran as standard bearers. In the 'New Middle East', in which Iran, as a result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, has arguably been given free rein to pursue its regional ambitions, and where the United States is perceived, by many of its allies, especially Riyadh, to be withdrawing from the region in a critical time, creating the perception of a power vacuum and feelings of abandonment. This perception of a new power vacuum being left by the United States which refused to act in any meaningful capacity in Syria has allowed the Shiites to overrun Iraq in a post Saadam Hussein Middle East. Iranian support for the Houthi Rebels in Yemen has pressed the Saudis to believe that they must take a more active, aggressive and hands on approach to foreign policy.¹ This new approach has led Saudi Arabia to react sharply both militarily, economically, and politically to advance its interests. The Saudi Arabian military intervention in the Yemeni Civil War against a perceived Iranian encroachment into its sphere of influence has inadvertently destabilizing a heavily fractured and divided Yemen further in an already crumbling and heavily fissured Middle East while also having had moderate success in politically uniting the Sunni Arab world in common cause against Iran and Sunni Islamic extremism.

¹ Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and the Nuclear Agreement with Iran," *INSS Insight*, 1-4, July 22, 2015. David Schenker, "The Shift in Saudi Foreign Policy," *The Washington Institute*, February 10, 2016. Marc Moussalli, "Not just a proxy war: Yemen's strategic importance," *Global Risk Insights*, April 23, 2015. Simon Henderson, "Desert Stretch: Saudi Arabia's Ambitious Military Operations," *The Washington Institute*, February 16, 2016. Anthony H, Cordesman, "America, Saudi Arabia, and the Strategic Importance of Yemen," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 26, 2015. Hakim Almasmari, "Yemen Conflict Devolves Into Proxy War," *Wall Street Journal*, March 26, 2015. Aaron David Miller and Jason Brodsky, "Saudi Arabia and Iran's Forever Fight," *Foreign Affairs*, January 13, 2016.

Operation Decisive Storm, the name given to the Saudi led military intervention in Yemen, began in March of 2015 in support of the President Abed-Rabbo Mansour Hadi who was facing an attempted coup turned civil war in early 2015. The civil war was begun by ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was supported by the Houthis and several army units who defected to his side.² In the ensuing chaos, Al Qaida and Islamic State, along with other Islamic terror groups, have made gains in Yemen, controlling large swaths of Yemeni territory.³

The Houthis, also known as the Ansar Allah, believers in a sect of Shi'ism called Zaydism, have been in perpetual conflict with the Sunni dominated government since the 1970's. After several decades of low level conflict, beginning in 2009, the Houthis began to grow closer to Iran both ideologically and politically. This budding relationship transformed into several different Houthi delegations being sent to Iran, with financial support and regular shipments of military arms from Iran being sent to the Houthis, who have used them in their fight against the coalition, jihadists, and government to push their own interests in Yemen. The support given to the Houthis has created a perception in Saudi Arabia that they must act in order to preserve the kingdom from potential Iranian encroachment into their own backyard. The Houthis themselves represent a direct threat to Southern Saudi Arabia, if the Houthis were to gain control of the country (though this is extremely unlikely), they could potentially threaten Saudi oil shipments and act as an Iranian satellite state, an unacceptable situation in the eyes of the Saudis.⁴

² Nawaf Obaid, "Saudi Arabia is emerging as the new Arab superpower," *The Telegraph*, May 5, 2015. Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Game in Yemen," *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2015. International Crisis Group, "Yemen: Is Peace Possible?" *International Crisis Group, Annual Report*, February 9, 2016.

³ J.M. Berger, "The Middle East's Franz Ferdinand Moment," *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2015. Barak Mendelsohn, "Islamic State in Yemen: Why IS is Seeking to Expand," *BBC*, March 21, 2015. Christopher Swift, "Change, Challenges, and Chaos in Yemen and Saudi Arabia," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, February 3, 2015. Ayisha Amr, "How al Qaeda Rules in Yemen," *Foreign Affairs*, October 28, 2015.

⁴ Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Game in Yemen," *Foreign Affairs*, April 19, 2015. Diana Al Rifai, "Timeline: The rise of Yemen's Houthis rebels," *Al-Jazeera*, April 23, 2015. Crisis Group, "Yemen: Is Peace Possible?" February, 2015.

This perceived threat of Iranian encroachment through its support for the Houthi rebels has clearly had a few major outcomes. The Saudi led coalition in Yemen, which is a response to the circumstances present in the region, Islamic extremism, and the Houthi's growing power, is made up of over a dozen states who are mostly Sunni Arab majority with nine other states from the MENA region actively contributing to the military mission. This military intervention, though fighting the Houthis, has largely been framed as one against Iranian encroachment and a push back against supposed Iranian regional hegemonic aspirations. Even states who are not Arab such as Turkey and Pakistan are participating in some sort of capacity.⁵ This unification of the Sunni world behind Riyadh is a clear indication of the pressure and unease being felt in the wake of the JCPOA and the perceived extension of Iranian reach and power towards regional domination which has created a very measureable shift in the reality of both the Sunni mindset and policy vis-vis Iran and her proxies in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon.⁶ It seems as if Saudi Arabia is establishing 'red lines' in Yemen, and potentially in Syria, that could possibly lead to direct confrontation if violated by Iran.

The war in Yemen reflects another genuine concern which Saudi Arabia has largely been successful combating domestically in the form of Sunni Islamic extremism which currently is thriving in the form of Al Qaida and Islamic State in parts Yemen.⁷ The United States had

Oren Dorell, "Iranian support for Yemen's Houthis goes back years," *USA TODAY*, April 20, 2015. Mohsen Milani, "Iran's Game in Yemen," *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, April 19, 2015.

⁵ Dina al-Shibeeb, "Your guide to 'Operation Decisive Storm'," *Al-Arabiya*, March 26, 2015. Obiad, "Saudi Arabia is," *The Telegraph*, May, 2015. Louisa Loveluck, "Saudi Arabia 'oversees deployment of ground troops in Yemen'," *The Telegraph*, May 3, 2015. MME Staff, "Houthis shell Saudi Arabia border town, prompting retaliation threat," *Middle East Eye*, May 5, 2015.

⁶ Aaron David Miller, "Saudi Arabia and Iran's Forever Fight," *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, January 13, 2016. Farideh Farhi, "The Middle East After the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 7, 2015. Hassan Hassan, "Old myths perpetuate poor analysis of Saudi," *The National*, January 17, 2016.

⁷ Mendelsohn, "Islamic State in Yemen," *BBC*, March, 2015. Amr, "How al Qaeda Rules," *Foreign Affairs*, October, 2015. Thomas Hegghammer, "Yemeni threat in Saudi Arabia?" *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2010. Thomas Hegghammer, "There is nothing soft about Saudi counterterrorism," *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2010.

originally begun a drone campaign largely against Al Qaida in Yemen beginning in 2009 which has largely had little to no effect in stopping Al Qaida's expansion.⁸ This threat on Saudi Arabia's southern border is two folds: not only does it potentially threaten Saudi Arabia through a spillover effect of Islamic extremism into Saudi Arabia, but also creates a potential staging zone for training, arming, funding and growth of these groups which could be exported to the wider region to states such as Jordan, Egypt, and Kuwait, which heavily rely on Saudi support as they are much less stable and do not have the military or financial muscle of Saudi Arabia which has largely become 'The First' Sunni State. It is imperative for the stability of the region that this threat be contained and eliminated if possible, just as Saudi Arabia has done domestically with both Sunni and Shiite extremism.⁹

The drop in price of oil by over 55% in the last year has greatly affected all petroleum producing countries around the world.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia and its fellow oil rich Gulf Cooperation Council members, have refused to slow down production of petroleum, preferring to fight for their market share. This can be seen as tactic used by the newly united front of the Sunni oil rich world (especially the Gulf States), to punish Iran for the JCPOA and to prevent Iranian funds from finding its way to the Houthis, Hezbollah or Iraqi Shiite Militias, all of whom, in the eyes

⁸ Conor Friedersdorf, "How America's Drone War in Yemen Strengthens al-Qaeda," *The Atlantic*, September 28, 2015. Jack Serle, "Drones strikes in Yemen," *The Bureau of Investigative Journalism*, January 30, 2015.

⁹ Kennet M. Pollack, "Fear and Loathing in Saudi Arabia," *Foreign Policy*, January 7, 2016. Berger, "The Middle East's," April, 2015. Anthony Chibarirwe, "Do Not Ignore Saudi Arabia's Islamic Military Alliance," *The Trumpet*, December 25, 2015. Obiad, "Saudi Arabia is," *The Telegraph*, May, 2015. Loveluck, "Saudi Arabia," *The Telegraph*, May, 2015. Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and the Nuclear Agreement with Iran," *INSS Insight*, July 22, 2015. Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia: A Buildup of Internal and External Challenges," *INSS Insight*, November 18, 2015. Amos Yadlin, "Another Round in the Saudi-Iranian Confrontation: What Does It Mean, and What Lies Ahead?" *INSS Insight*, January 14, 2016.

¹⁰ Yoel Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States Amidst Falling Oil Prices and Regional Upheavals," *INSS Insight*, September 7, 2015.

of Saudi Arabia, act as proxies of Iran in the current puzzle of conflicts in the Middle East.¹¹ Practically speaking this may keep petroleum prices down which will force Saudi Arabia to dip into its financial reserves to maintain the incursion into Yemen, which amounts to tens of thousands of troops, as well as hundreds of tanks, planes and naval assets.¹² If this situation continues to progress it will most likely put an enormous strain in the long term on all petroleum producing economies especially Saudi Arabia who relies heavily on oil production for the majority of its yearly budget and to support for its welfare system.¹³

The JCPOA between the P5+1 and Iran may have addressed the issue of nuclear proliferation for the time being, but the negligence of the world powers to address other issues and concerns in the region vis-vis Iran is clearly evident in places like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen today. This is becoming more evident as the Sunni World reacts to a changing reality that is exacerbated through the perception of a vacuum of power left by the United States that has for all intents and purposes, stopped taking a hands on approach to the Middle East. The only real hope for reaching a peaceful solution is to bring all sides to the negotiation table to address the issues between them and draw clearly defined boundaries that, if respected, will prevent both the Shiite block led by Iran and Sunni block led by Saudi Arabia, from proxy warfare, or potentially more dangerous, full blown direct conflict.

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¹² Bilal Saab, "Houthi and the Blowback," *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, March 29, 2015. Bilal Saab, "Riyadh's Oil Play," *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, January 6, 2015. Hassan Hassan, "Only the Gulf countries can deliver a stable region," *The National*, January 24, 2016.

¹³ Guzansky, "Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States," *INSS Insight*, September, 2015. Saab, "Riyadh's Oil Play," *Foreign Affairs*, January, 2015.

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