

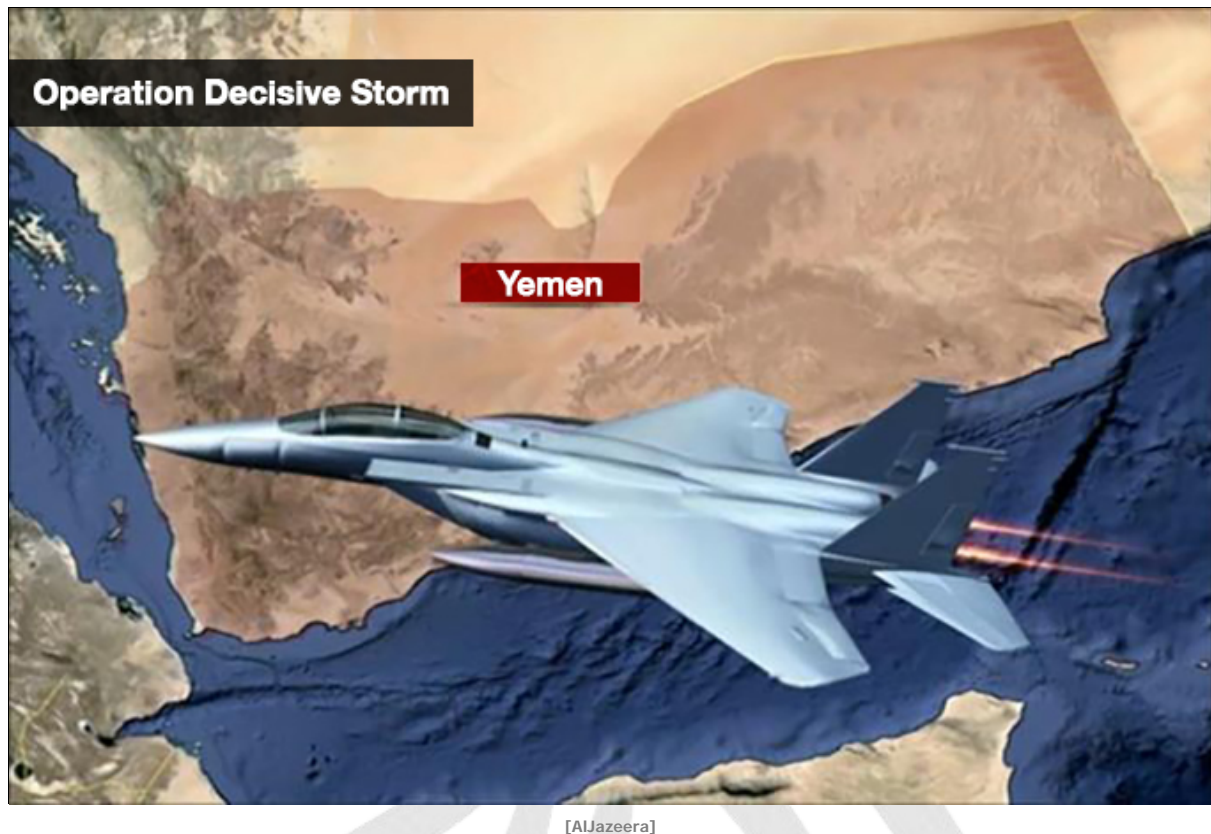
Position Papers

Operation Decisive Storm: Reshuffling Regional Order

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Abstract

Operation Decisive Storm is being interpreted as a first step towards curbing Iranian expansion in the Arab world rather than a step towards protecting Yemen and its legitimacy. Pakistan and Turkey's support for this operation is significant in light of the US' visible withdrawal from the region. With the operation still in its early days, it has become imperative to re-examine its goals, their feasibility, and implications of the attacks.

Introduction

Late Wednesday, 25 March, fleets of Saudi Air Force jets began bombing military targets across Yemen. The operation, named "Decisive Storm", was announced a few hours after its launch. Riyadh released an official statement while Saudi's ambassador to Washington, DC held a press conference there, in which he addressed the operation's legal basis and goals. Some Arabs began to express their support, and Arab officials made several resolutions during the Arab Summit in Sharm al-Shaikh on 28 and 29 March reflecting their commitment to the operation.

These sentiments reflected increasing frustration with Iranian expansion in the Arab world, with many perceiving that Iran took advantage of a power vacuum in the Arab world as result of hindered revolution and reform movements. These feelings intensified as Iran decided to stand by counterrevolutionary movements, often fuelling sectarian conflicts, civil wars and internal divisions.

However, nearly two weeks into the operation, and with a humanitarian crisis looming, it is necessary to review the true reasons behind Operation Decisive Storm, the reality of the participating alliance, the prospects for meeting its goals and its effect on the regional power balance.

Why did Saudi Arabia wage this war?

The Houthis in Yemen do not themselves constitute a threat to Saudi Arabia. They have a limited popular base, even among Yemeni Zaidis. In 2009, Houthis believed that Saudi was supporting the Yemeni government's war against them and thus clashed with Saudi troops. Over the following years, Riyadh dealt with the Houthi phenomenon as one of the manifestations of the political fragmentation of Yemen. However, the problem that Saudi Arabia has confronted since the Houthi takeover of Sanaa in September was that the group appeared to be allied with Iran, an alliance that was broader and deeper than previously assessed. Further, it is now clear that former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who exercises strong influence over more than a half of the Yemeni armed forces, has become part of the Houthi-Iran alliance. The Houthis have displayed they are indifferent toward the internal Yemeni dialogue, and are attempting to impose comprehensive unilateral control over Yemeni affairs.

As early as 1934, Saudi went to war with Yemen and supported the forces that opposed the Nasserite presence in Yemen throughout the Yemeni civil war in the 1960s. Saudi continued to have interests in Yemen over the past fifty years, including billions of dollars of aid to the Yemeni state. Thus, Saudi felt threatened that its rival, Iran, through the power of a political minority, had started to influence affairs in Yemen, particularly given Iran's "victories" in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Saudi Arabia also believed that the Yemeni state's continued instability could lead to further disruption of the social and political situation in the country, including increased al-Qaeda presence in the country.

The three key reasons Saudi chose direct military intervention in Yemen include:

- The Houthis were expanding geographically. After taking control of Sanaa, the Houthis (strengthened by support from the Republican Guard and Special Forces loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh), they moved on to other provinces in the centre, south and coast areas of the country. They also tried to take over Aden after President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi fled there from Sanaa.

- The Houthis were letting Iran in. In the name of the Yemeni state, the Houthis were giving Iran increased access to the country.
- The US declined to intervene. The US, one of Saudi's oldest allies, made it clear that it did not have plans to intervene in Yemeni affairs or attempt to restore the balance of political power in Yemen. Saudi felt that it had to intervene regardless of the US' stance.

Allies of various kinds

While the US had expressed it would not become directly involved, it confirmed through its public statements and telephone conversations between President Barack Obama and King Salman bin Abdul Aziz that it supported Saudi actions in Yemen. The US also expressed willingness to provide logistical and intelligence assistance to Saudi's military efforts in the country. However, the US will probably not announce the extent of its assistance in this operation to avoid provoking Iran in light of the ongoing talks on the Iranian nuclear programme.

Aside from the US, there are a number of other countries involved in Operation Decisive Storm. Hours after the first attack, Saudi officially announced that nine other countries were in the coalition: Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco and Pakistan.

It is important to note the statement was issued in the name of the states that had indicated a willingness to participate in the coalition and not in the GCC's name. GCC states were only informed a few days before the operation began, with Oman declining to participate. Egypt and Jordan were not party to the decision to launch the offensive, perhaps because Saudi Arabia was not completely reassured about Jordanian steps to enhance rapprochement with Iran over the past few weeks ahead of the Decisive Storm, or about Cairo's contacts with the Houthis in Yemen and abroad. However, only after various Arab and Islamic states had been informed about the operation, and after the strikes began, did Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco and Pakistan express their readiness to join the alliance. Turkey backed the offensive, but the actual extent of its support will be left to discussions between Saudi and Turkish officials.

It is now certain that the first strikes were carried out by Saudi aircraft, and that the other GCC states in the coalition had not completed their preparations when the operation had actually begun. Pakistan's involvement was confirmed after more than a

week of the air attacks. Egypt took days to send naval vessels to the Yemeni coast, and there is still no evidence of its participation in the air strikes. It is also unclear whether there is an actual Jordanian and Moroccan participation. Sudan's role has been restricted to the participation of a few fighter jets in the air raids.

Ahmed Abdullah Saleh, son of the deposed president and an influential person overseeing Saleh's control and influence over the Yemeni army, and then-Yemen's ambassador to the UAE, had requested to visit Saudi Arabia just two days before Operation Decisive Storm began. Although the balance of power in Yemen had shifted largely in favour of the Houthis and forces loyal to ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh, Ahmed Saleh told the Saudi defence minister, Mohammed bin Salman, that he and his father were willing to turn against the Houthis and mobilise tens of thousands of loyal forces against the group. In return, he asked for immunity for him and his father, lifting the sanctions imposed on them and ending the freeze on their wealth.

The operation made it clear that the Saudi administration had rejected Saleh's offer. The Saudis had lost all confidence in Abdullah Saleh and had realised the mistake of the GCC initiative which had ensured him immunity, and accepted his stay in Yemen, thus allowing him to play a considerable role in the political power balance there after the revolution. Riyadh's rejection implied Saudi believed that Decisive Storm must lead to a more fundamental solution to the crisis, one that would exclude Saleh and his camp completely and would pave the way for a more sustainable and lasting stability in Yemen.

War based on airstrikes

Thus far, the military activities carried out during Operation Decisive Storm indicate that air strikes are its main pillar, with Saudi Arabia and its allies attempting to achieve the following:

- Destroying air defence sites, command centres, supply and logistics lines and warehouses of forces loyal to Saleh and the Houthis, as well as assisting forces loyal to Hadi and other anti-Houthi tribal forces around Aden and in Marib, Shabwa, al-Baidha, Dhamar, Lahej and Dalea.
- Imposing a full embargo on Yemeni ports to prevent military supplies from Iran and other sources reaching the Houthis and forces loyal to Saleh.

- Mustering a sufficient ground force to defend Saudi borders against any attempts to penetrate them.

Air strikes can only do so much and will not force the Houthis to surrender. The difficult Yemeni terrain can protect the Houthis for quite a while. Forces loyal to Saleh may be paralysed by the strikes, causing them to withdraw from the battlefield or abandon Saleh. If the operation remains confined to air strikes, the best that can be achieved is that losses may push the Houthis to request a new dialogue in which their participation will be based on the gains they had achieved during the first dialogue held before they took control of Sanaa. However, if the Houthis refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of Hadi's presidency and to engage in the dialogue, the operation will develop into a ground war.

Whose ground war?

If the coalition forces decide to launch a ground war (which is expected to be comprised mainly of Saudi forces), Yemen will become the battlefield of an asymmetric war. Trained armed forces will face groups of armed factions who have more knowledge of the country's terrain and its conditions. In this scenario, armed forces are likely to suffer large losses. The least risky option is that Saudi and GCC States will support Hadi to form a cohesive Yemeni force to fight the Houthis and their allies, and liberate the capital and major cities from their control.

Such a force could consist of:

1. tribal volunteers;
2. armed factions of the Yemeni Congregation for Reform (al-Islah) and its allies;
3. military forces loyal to the legitimate president; and
4. military forces of commanders that defect from Saleh's troops.

One problem is that after Hadi left the Arab Summit, he returned to Riyadh rather than Aden. Before his departure from Aden he had not appointed a defence minister, following the Houthi kidnapping of the former minister. Also, there are no indications that Hadi has formed or is planning to form a military commission to control the forces loyal to his administration. In other words, procedures to form and organise a legitimate army have not begun, and it will take a long time before it is organised. Thus, this war may last

much longer than many have imagined, exacerbating humanitarian conditions that are already dismal.

War's implications, regional impact

Saudi Arabia waged war without waiting for an international, Arab or even GCC cover. They justified the war by Hadi's request for Saudi and GCC intervention to save Yemen from a complete Houthi takeover. This Saudi step, while hailed as decisive and unprecedented, is reminiscent of earlier days during Abdul Aziz Al Saud's reign, before the country became a US ally. Saudi also justifies the operation as an initial step towards ending Iranian expansion in the Arab world, and Pakistan and Turkey's involvement is seen as a further measure to balance regional power post-US withdrawal.

Many analysts say the Iranians were taken by surprise by the Saudi decision to wage war. Geographic considerations make it difficult for Iran to open up a new front in addition to its military presence in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, Iran is cautious about entering a war against this alliance that will make it look isolated in the Muslim world. On the other hand, Tehran is aware that being silent about a defeat in Yemen will mean that resistance to its presence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon will increase. Therefore, it is likely that Tehran will try to enhance its control over Iraq and its decision-making process, and rearrange its cards in Syria and Lebanon, regardless of the nuclear talks outcomes. Still others argue that Iran was preparing itself for the impending attack and is ready to face ground forces should they enter.

No war is free of destruction and negative economic consequences. Operation Decisive Storm has already caused civilian deaths and injuries as well as displacement and destruction. Yemeni military capabilities will also be affected by this Saudi-led war. If Operation Decisive Storm achieves its goals, and a new consensus-based Yemeni government is formed, the GCC states have a responsibility to launch economic development initiatives that will put the country back on track. The GCC should consider the possibility of giving Yemen special status to ensure that the country's path to lasting stability and immunity from foreign intervention and sectarian fragmentation is smooth and undeterred.

In conclusion, this war will have a great impact on its two main poles: Iran and Saudi Arabia. For many reasons, it will not be restricted to Yemen. The war has revealed the growing sectarian polarisation caused by Iran's reliance on Shia militias in its efforts to expand its influence in the Arab region. This has generated hostility among many Arabs

who feel that their sectarian Sunni identity is threatened, and there is deep concern over Iran's expansionist policies. If the war meets the goals of the Saudi-led coalition, however, the Arab and regional role and influence of Saudi Arabia could increase, especially given the influence it has exercised after the collapse of many Arab state institutions and the waning influence of other Arab countries.

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