

Position Papers

Implications of Operation Decisive Storm

Al Jazeera Center for Studies





Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman coordinated the strikes at the Royal Saudi Air Force operations centre near Riyadh [SPANews]

Abstract

Saudi Arabia, along with nine of its allies, has launched an offensive on the Houthi groups in Yemen. This offensive will have implications on not only Saudi Arabia and its immediate neighbours, but also on other international actors, including Iran and western countries such as the United States. This paper addresses the repercussions of this operation in light of growing Iranian expansion in the Arab world.

Introduction

The implications of the military strikes launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in collaboration with nine other countries (Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the Republic of the Sudan, Jordan, Morocco and Pakistan), against the Houthis in the republic of Yemen on 25 March 2015, have several implications for the participating coalition, for Yemen, for the region at large and for other international players. The ultimate objective of this operation is to restore the legitimacy of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, prevent the total collapse of Yemen, avoid a civil war in the country, avert a humanitarian catastrophe in which tens of thousands of refugees will begin to flee Yemen to the Gulf States and other neighbouring countries, and finally to halt the expansion of Iran in the Arab Gulf at large.

For the last two years, Iran has invested heavily in Yemen, and that has paved the way for a change in the landscape and the balance of power in Yemen and the region. Iran has used the Houthi groups to carry out its ambitions to control Yemen and to challenge the legitimacy of the internationally-recognised president, Mansour Hadi. Particularly

during the last few months, Iran has not shied away from building and maintaining an air transport system to support the Houthi military and to strengthen their hold on the country illegally. The Iranians have been very comfortable with creating proxy wars in several neighbouring Arab countries to enhance their negotiating position with the P5+1 regarding their nuclear proliferation programme.

Operation Decisive Storm ('Asifet al-Hazm) was Saudi's legitimate and logical response to block Iranian expansion in the Gulf and to prevent a humanitarian disaster in the Kingdom's backyard. Therefore, this was not a war of choice for the Saudi-led coalition, but rather a war of necessity after all the diplomatic attempts failed to convince the Houthis to adhere to the legitimacy of the leader of Yemen and their refusal to consider any peaceful solutions to the crisis. This war was essential and unavoidable, for it involves the supreme national interests of the Saudis and most of the GCC countries.

Regional Implications

Operation Decisive Storm incorporates the following nine coalition countries: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, the Republic of the Sudan, Jordan, Morocco and Pakistan. Oman has declined to participate in the coalition for both domestic and foreign reasons: Oman borders Yemen and also shares mutual interests with Iran. It has always played the intermediary role between Iran and the rest of the countries in the region, thus it prefers to remain neutral and influence the behaviour of key players from the outside.

Since its Islamic revolution, Iran has challenged many countries in the Arab world, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Consequently, the Saudis could no longer remain silent towards the conflict in Yemen as it began to threaten their national security and their stability especially after the many controversial statements that have been uttered by many leading voices inside the Islamic Republic regarding their control of four Arab capitals and their influence on the straits of Bab al Mandeb.

Therefore, the Saudi led coalition has little freedom to make this decisive decision to stop Iran from threatening the region. The Saudi led coalition is sending several messages to Iran and other actors in the international community by this operation. First, there is very little tolerance to Iran's expansion and influence in the region. Second, Iran will not be allowed to meddle in the affairs of more countries in the Arab World. Third, the constant destabilization of Iran and its proxies to many of the countries in the Middle East, will be met with unwavering force and strong resolve. Finally, the Saudi-led

operation could convince Iran to change its aggressive behaviour and reconsider its current approach in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Otherwise, the emerging new alliance will not permit anymore belligerent and destructive policies by Iran against anyone.

The Saudi-led coalition can justify its operation on three grounds: Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which affords countries the right to self-defence. Moreover, the Riyadh Declaration of 2009, which includes the GCC countries, Egypt and Jordan, authorises them to defend water outlets in the region. Perhaps most significantly, the formal request of the legitimate leader of Yemen for Arab states and forces to intervene and protect Yemen from the Houthis and Iran.

Implications for Yemen

Operation Decisive Storm should preserve Yemen's unity and must prevent a civil war from taking place in the country. Tension has been high between forces loyal to President Hadi and forces loyal to the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh, the country's former president. In addition, it will limit further Iranian influence in the country.

However, President Hadi will find it very difficult to justify calling for foreign intervention in his own country if the death toll begins to rise among civilians. The civilian death toll and the damage to the country's infrastructure by Saudi led coalition strikes will be used by his opponents to delegitimise and weaken him. The longer the coalition sustains its operations, the more negative implications there will be for president Hadi and his supporters. Therefore, the coalition has to strive for ending the war, limiting the damage, reviving the hope of the average Yemeni, constraining the Houthis and their supporters, rebuilding the institutions, and design an economic aid package to help Yemen recover and revive its economy.

Should the coalition strikes be successful, the Houthis' power will diminish. However, they will not be the only primary losers; rather, the ousted President, Ali Abdullah Saleh will suffer from the impact as well. His relations with the majority of the Gulf States will be severed, and he will go down in history as the leader who collaborated with foreign forces, Iran, to destroy his own country.

Implications for Iran

As previously stated, the Saudi-led coalition had the goal of containing Iranian expansion in the region. During the last few years, Iran has focused on Yemen as a key expansion

opportunity and has been eager to build a coalition with the Houthis. It has realised this by granting the Houthi group military, financial and logistical assistance.

Early on, Iran wanted the Houthis to be an important part of the equation in Yemen and has succeeded in realising its policies through the Houthis, particularly in the last few months. Iran has been publicly adamant that it will challenge Saudi Arabia in the Gulf and in other places.

For Iran, there are several possible scenarios. First, Iran has maintained a strong presence across the Gulf and may use that as leverage to influence future outcomes. Or, Iran could use the Houthis to engage the Saudis in a war of attrition in Yemen. In terms of what this will mean for Iran's nuclear programme, Iran believes there is no link between the P5+1 nuclear negotiations and regional issues.

Global Implications

Operation Decisive Storm will most likely introduce new alliances in the region and pave the way for the international rehabilitation of countries like the Republic of the Sudan and Pakistan. Both countries will be reintroduced by Saudi Arabia as reliable and trusted allies against an aggressive and expansionist Iran. The Saudis, through this operation, have regained the initiative and demonstrated their ability to form coalitions away from the U.S. and any Western country.

The U.S. has disappointed many of its allies in the region by choosing to be passive and by rehabilitating Iran and legitimizing its aggressive actions at the expense of many Gulf countries. In light of operation decisive storm, Iran will encounter more resentments and challenge in the region. The coalition's war against Yemen will most likely slow any nuclear agreement from taking place anytime soon. The U.S. will be forced to choose between its traditional allies and an aggressive alternative with an agenda to dominate the region. Concluding a nuclear agreement with Iran at this stage is an insult to all the coalition countries and it will embolden Iran to be more aggressive in its policies in the region. Iran has been aspiring to conclude a nuclear agreement with P5+1 at the earliest possible time. The war in Yemen should enhance the P5+1 negotiating positions by granting them enough time to address the Gulf states concerns and allow them to pay more attention to Saudi's repeated worries of any potential bad deal with Iran.

The Saudis and their coalition must be sensitive to the economic implications of this war and its impact on the prices of oil around the world. The coalition should strive to end

the war decisively and to its favour at the earliest possible time, to prevent the Iranians and the Russians from using the rise of oil prices to their benefit and to prevent prolonging the war of attrition against the coalition forces. Iran and Russia would prefer the expansion of the war and turning it to a quagmire for the Saudi led coalition. But, the coalition has to be very decisive and conclude the war as early as it can with the outcome it seeks to prevent a war of attrition and stabilize Yemen and the Gulf at large.

Conclusion

The formation of the Saudi-led coalition demonstrated very real and growing regional concerns about Iranian expansion and the unease this has caused. While it is too early in the operation to fully comprehend the implications, the reality is that Operation Decisive Storm will certainly impact not only the actors involved, but also the global and regional balance of power, with new alliances likely not only in the region but also internationally. The fact that nine countries are participating in the Saudi-led coalition indicates that Iran's policies are rejected by a significant number of countries in the region.

Copyright © 2015 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved