

Report

Operation Decisive Storm: Objectives and Hurdles

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Abstract

Operation Decisive Storm has the potential to affect the balance of power in the region for many years to come and shift many traditional political and military parameters in the Arab World and the larger Middle East. The success or failure of the operation is contingent on its ability to achieve its objectives and replicate its actions in the countries that suffer from experiences similar to that of Yemen.

Introduction

Operation Decisive Storm is likely to change the political and military dynamics in the Middle East for years to come. The speed at which a ten-country coalition was formed and mobilized is unprecedented in the Arab World. The coalition sent a clear message to many actors regionally and globally, especially those who have doubted Arab unity and decisiveness, that the Arab World is willing and able to control its own destiny, protect its own interests, and prevent the collapse of another Arab state. Operation Decisive Storm put an end to many of these speculations and ushered in a new vision for unity, paving the way for the Arab league to entertain the establishment of a joint Arab Force to deter any future existential threat that may face the region.

This report discusses the political objectives and military obstacles facing the coalition forces in Yemen. The report focuses on the long-term strategies of the Saudi led coalition and its partners in Yemen and beyond.

Operation Decisive Storm: Why?

Operation Decisive Storm is a war of necessity, not of choice, according to many analysts and observers.⁽¹⁾ After exhausting all the diplomatic initiatives, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), absent Oman, has launched a war against the Houthis and their supporters in Yemen to prevent the country from collapsing and avert a humanitarian catastrophe similar to the Syrian and Iraqi ones. The Operation began in the early morning hours of March 26, 2015 with the full participation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, and Sudan.

The broader intentions of the war are to establish a new political order in the Middle East and to deter Iran from meddling in the affairs of its neighbors, in light of the bellicose statements uttered by many political and military leaders in Tehran in the last few months. Some Iranian leaders have declared that Sana'a, the capital of Yemen, is the fourth Arab capital to come under their control.⁽²⁾ With Sana'a falling into the hands of the Houthis, a proxy of Iran, many of the GCC countries have become surrounded by Iran or its proxies. The GCC had little leverage to prevent Iran from streaming into Iraq after the 2003 American invasion. But the case of Yemen is totally different: there is no foreign power to prevent the GCC from stopping Iran from infiltrating Yemen, and few will blame the GCC for stopping Iran's advance to their shores.

Yemen represents a grave threat to the security and stability of the GCC and the region at large. Any disruption of normalcy in Yemen would lead to economic and military setbacks for the GCC in particular and many other Arab countries in general, especially Egypt and Sudan, two Red Sea powers. The GCC will bear the economic and security brunt of any destabilization in Yemen. Consequently, a military intervention was necessary to prevent a humanitarian and security disaster in the country, and to deter Iran from meddling in the affairs of the GCC and other Arab countries. The security of Yemen is essential to the security of the GCC and the international community. Allowing any irresponsible state or non-state actors to threaten the security of Yemen or its water outlets will have grave economic and security consequences for the region and will threaten global peace. Therefore an Arab action was necessary to define the moment and shape the future. This Arab response came in the shape of King Salman's, the King of Saudi Arabia, doctrine.⁽³⁾

King Salman's doctrine stands on several key principles: The Arabs are able and willing to defend themselves; Iran is a threat to Arab unity and stability and must be deterred; the Arabs have and can provide an alternative to the status quo and to the Iranian narrative in the region; Arab security and development will be accomplished indigenously; what unites the Arabs is larger and more important than what divides

them; and the Arabs are capable of defining the moment and able to write their own narrative.

The philosophical foundation of this doctrine was presented to the Obama administration during Emir Tamim ben Hamad Al Thani's visit to the United States between February 24-27, 2015.⁽⁴⁾ Emir Tamim told his American host that "Qatar is ready to prevent the collapse of many countries in the region."⁽⁵⁾ He provided the scope in which Qatar is willing to do that when he spoke at Georgetown University, saying, "I will be honest with you--we should not only be depending on America. [We] Arab countries, we should do our own work, and then we should ask the Americans if we need help to help us solve our problems."⁽⁶⁾ Therefore, this shared Saudi and Qatari vision paved the way for the Arab coalition to materialize and refocused and prioritized Arab interests vis-à-vis common threats and challenges.

Operation Decisive Storm came as a result of some Arab countries preferring indigenous solutions to local problems. Historically, Arab countries have relied on Western protection and Western solutions to their domestic problems. Operation Decisive Storm embodies a deviation from the standards used in the past and introduces a genre of action rare in the region. The Yemeni case imposed its own dynamics and ushered in its own principle and likely to be the model of the future.

Political Dynamics in Yemen

The political situation in Yemen has been worsening since 2004. The Houthis, an offshoot of Shi'a Islam, have been challenging the legitimacy of the central government and have been seeking a bigger political role in Yemen. In the process, they have developed a strong militia and begun to defy the government on many fronts. Former president Ali Abdullah Saleh was manipulating them and engaging them militarily to limit their expansion, but he never launched a decisive war against them to end their destabilization of Yemen. Saleh's tactics with the Houthis were built on three principles. First, Saleh wanted to weaken the Houthis, but not destroy them, to prevent any political reforms in the country. Second, he played the sectarian card inside Yemen: Saleh used the Houthis to strengthen his children and clan at the expense of the country and other important local players and to have an absolute monopoly over power in Yemen. Third, Saleh used the Houthis to exert pressure on the region, especially the KSA, to justify economic and military support.⁽⁷⁾ Saleh played all these cards masterfully until he was deposed in 2011 by his own people.⁽⁸⁾ Saleh was replaced by his deputy, Abed Robo Mansour Hadi, in February, 2012, after the GCC negotiated a transition of power in the country.

Hadi experienced many domestic challenges, failed to stabilize the country, and was unsuccessful in uniting the Yemenis around any clear goals. His attempt to hold elections, or to pass a constitutional referendum, or built a strong governing coalition with all political players failed to materialize. His passivity in facing these political problems emboldened many local operatives to challenge his leadership. Hadi's biggest threat came from the Houthis, who captured Sana'a in September, 2014, and from Saleh, who joined forces with the Houthis to topple Hadi and prevent him from succeeding. The tacit alliance between Saleh and the Houthis strengthened the resolve of the Houthis and bolstered their attempts to control all of Yemen.(9)

The Houthis began their march on vital institutions in the main cities, capturing sensitive arteries and forcing many political leaders to flee their posts at gun point. The Houthi takeover intensified the anxiety of many regional and global powers. For instance, many embassies began closing their doors in protest, as others ordered their citizens to evacuate the country. The Houthi takeover of the country forced the resignation of Hadi and his government. In light of these developments and before Iran began shipping military and other logistical equipment to the Houthis to strengthen their hold on power.(10) The power vacuum that Hadi caused by his passivity allowed some Iranians to claim that the capital, Sana'a, was the fourth Arab capital to fall under Iranian control.

The inflammatory and offensive declarations that began to leak from Teheran about Baghdad, Damascus, Sana'a, and Beirut put the region on notice and nullified the diplomatic mission of Jamal Benomar, the United Nations envoy to Yemen. Benomar was negotiating a peaceful settlement and was exhausting all possible means to arrive at a workable agreement, but the Houthis were more interested in a foreign, rather than indigenous, solution to the problems of Yemen. The Houthis were consulting with Iran at every step and allowed the Iranians to make decisions on their behalf. The Arab Gulf states were aware of the close coordination between the Houthis and Iran, but were hopeful that Benomar would succeed, to no avail. Therefore, the Arab Gulf States, absent Oman, decided that it was time to act to prevent Iran from coming any closer to their shores and to thwart any further attempts by the Houthis to destabilize Yemen and the region at large.

Operation Decisive Storm: Political Objectives and Challenges

Objectives

The declared objectives of Operation Decisive Storm are the restoration of legitimacy for the legally chosen leader of Yemen; no role for former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in the future of Yemen; the withdrawal of all Houthi fighters from the streets; and the demilitarization of the Houthis. The coalition has garnered all the legitimate mechanisms

to achieve these objectives and has been coordinating fully with the key players inside Yemen in order to navigate the stormy waters of the country. The Saudi-led coalition has been coordinating closely with president Hadi, who requested a military intervention to disarm the Houthis, and many other power brokers on the ground. For instance, the coalition has been coordinating with the Al Eslah movement and the popular committees (Al Hashad Al Sha'abee) to bring stability to Yemen. Strengthening and supporting Hadi's base is key for the coalition to win its war and change the socio-political dynamics in the country. In addition, the Saudi-led coalition has been working tirelessly at the Arab League and the United Nations to secure a regional and global consensus for the operation and widen its scope. The objectives and the legitimacy of the operation have received a great deal of support from around the globe and many countries have offered to provide logistical and intelligence material to the coalition partners.

Operation Decisive Storm thus far has accomplished the following: it prevented the disintegration of Yemen, averting a civil war in country; Sana'a will not fall into the hands of Iran; no ethnic cleansing will be allowed in Yemen; no refugees will be streaming out of the country to destabilize the neighborhood; and finally and most importantly, it provided a counter narrative to the Iranian one. Iran has been manipulating the scene for the last decade in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and now Yemen. Every place Iran has gone has suffered from a civil war and destruction. The Saudi-led coalition can provide a counter narrative to that gloomy picture. Iran equals civil wars and destruction; a Saudi-led coalition means unity, development, economic revival, and prosperity. Iran, like any other imperial power, brings havoc and destruction; the alternative, like any liberation movement, brings independence and unity.

Challenges

One of the gravest challenges could be the prolonging of the war. If Operation Decisive Storm lasts longer than anticipated, this might cause many hurdles for the coalition in the long run. Extending the war could cause many civilian deaths; it could destroy the infrastructure of one of the poorest countries in the Arab World, increasing the sectarian tensions, complicating any reconciliation efforts among all the parties, and gradually shifting global sympathy from the coalition to the Houthis and their supporters on the ground.

The Saudi-led coalition ought to be sensitive about the holy month of Ramadan and plan for the war to end before that. The Houthis and their supporters might want the war to last beyond Ramadan to embarrass the coalition and its leaders and to enhance their negotiating position. During Ramadan, hundreds of thousands of Muslims stream to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina to perform a ritual known as Umrah. If the human suffering continues in Yemen, many may protest the Operation and cause instability

inside Mecca. Saudi security forces may respond and that could lead to many challenges for the KSA and other GCC countries.

Winning the war might be a tactic of the coalition, but winning the peace must be the strategy. Yemen is in dire need of economic aid and development in all its sectors. An indigenous economic plan is necessary and critical to change the socio-political dynamics in the country. Restoring hope to the average Yemeni will play a productive role in reshaping the country and its future for years to come. In addition, a generous economic package to redevelop the country would increase the soft power of the coalition and would weaken Iran and its supporters. Also, developing Yemen could serve as a model for the Iraqis and Syrians and encourage them to distance themselves from the Iranian model and embrace the Yemeni one.

Prospects for ground forces present a key challenge to Operation Decisive Storm. The heavy casualties that it may entail and the geography of Yemen could present the coalition forces with a dilemma and thwart their plans to have an exit strategy with all objectives achieved. Therefore, the coalition should strategize to change the behavior of the Houthis, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and their supporters from the General People's Congress by changing their cost benefit analysis on the ground, with the least possible casualties and infrastructural damage. The coalition should be ready for limited as well as wide ground operations in certain areas to tip the balance of power in favor of Hadi's supporters and to prevent misguided judgments by the Houthis or anyone else concerning who will prevail.

The Houthis' best option at this critical stage is to lead a war of attrition against the Saudi-led coalition and worsen the humanitarian situation on the ground to entice more political and diplomatic pressure against the coalition forces. A decisive victory in the shortest possible time is the best outcome for the coalition; any lengthening of the war will play into the hands of the Houthis and their supporters, and will turn public opinion away from Hadi and the Saudi-led coalition forces.

Operation Decisive Storm: Towards a New Balance of Power in the Middle East

Since the end of World War II, the U.S. and the former Soviet Union had been enforcing an awkward but flexible balance power in the Middle East. A change occurred when the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991 and the U.S. spearheaded a unipolar system in the region. The events of 9/11 and the two wars that the U.S. led against Afghanistan and Iraq changed the dynamics of power in the Middle East and decreased the ability of the U.S. to maintain a firm control of events in the region. The American failure to accomplish a decisive military or moral victory in Iraq paved the way for many to

challenge its superiority in the Middle East. In addition, the constant declarations by President Obama of U.S. intentions to pivot to Asia and his shaky commitments to peace and stability in the Middle East invited many ambitious countries to fill the power vacuum.

China, Iran and Russia each penetrated the region from a different angle. Iran played the sectarian card, Russia the military, and China the economic, but the three had a clear agenda: to challenge the U.S. and divide the region according to their interests. The sectarian one has been the most dangerous. Iran's philosophy anchored around one principle: to create and support shadow governments and movements that challenge the stability and legitimacy of its Arab neighbors. In Lebanon it has been supporting Hezbollah to challenge the state; In Iraq it manipulated Nouri Kamal al-Maliki and pressured him to make decisions along sectarian lines; in Syria it invited chaos by sending many sectarian militias to fight alongside the Alawi sect rather than support a peaceful transition to democracy; and in Yemen, Iran has been supporting the Houthis and Al Hiraq al Janoubi, or the Southern Movements, a coalition of secessionist groups, and encouraging them to establish a shadow government to challenge Hadi's legitimacy and eventually split the country into fighting zones. In addition, Iran opened political channels with the General People's Congress and other groups in the country to further destabilize Yemen. Furthermore, Iran welcomed an economic delegation from Yemen and boosted its economic and political cooperation with Sana'a in an unprecedented manner.⁽¹¹⁾

In sum, Iran has been interested in increasing its political and economic gains in Yemen at the expense of all the regional countries, especially the KSA. This Iranian behavior sends shivering and alarming waves into the spine of the GCC countries. Regional leaders are familiar with what Iran has been advocating in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. The Iranian conduct has alarmed the GCC countries and forced them to rearrange their priorities in the region. Iran's sectarian policies and its nuclear ambitions compelled the region to reconsider many of its policies and forced a reshifting of priorities in the last two decades.

Iran's policies are threatening a Muslim/Muslim Cold War in the region. Iran has prepared the ground for many of its satellite proxies to defend that approach, while the Sunni powers in the region were awaiting the protection and intervention of their Western friends. The Iranian strategy of destabilizing the region by changing its balance of power invited the forceful reaction of the Saudi-led coalition. Operation Decisive Storm came as a necessary response to the aggressive policies of Iran and its proxies in the region. Iran needs Yemen to strengthen its bargaining position with the West and the Arabs. Iran is eager to tell its interlocutors that it has power over the straits of Hermouz, Bab Al Mandeb, and the Suez Canal. Moreover, Iran is keen to convince the

West of its centrality to fighting Piercy in the horn of Africa and the Al Shabab movement in Somalia. Therefore, Yemen could provide Iran with a great deal of needed leverage to present itself as a regional power in the Middle East to the U.S., the European Union, Russia and China.

Iran has been relying on China and Russia to accomplish its agenda in the Arab World. Both countries have been providing Iran with economic, military, and diplomatic support to achieve its desired outcomes. The two countries used their veto powers at the UN to support the Iranian position in Syria and in the last few days in Yemen; supplied Iran with state-of-the-art weaponry; and signed lucrative economic deals to prevent Iran's economic demise.

Conclusion

The Saudi-led coalition acted decisively to deter Iran, stabilize Yemen, unite as many Arab/regional countries as possible around certain interests, establish a new balance of power in light of the United States' gradual withdrawal from the region, regain the political and the security initiatives, and shape the debate in the Arab World. These strategic objectives would not have been possible without a military intervention in Yemen that would send a clear message to all actors in the international community that the GCC and many other states in the Middle East are very frustrated with Iran's expansionist's policies and the U.S. inaction towards the threats that face the region at large. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq exhausted the American military and treasury and weakened U.S. resolve to continue to serve as the only super power in the region.

The choices before the Saudi-led coalition were very limited: either allow another Arab capital to fall into the hands of Iran, or stand firm to thwart the destruction of more Arab countries. The war was imposed on the Saudi-led coalition and the participating parties had no choice but to unite to face an existential threat from Iran. The alternative would have been more chaos and further destruction of other Arab countries. Had the coalition not intervened at the critical juncture it did, the humanitarian and political situation on the ground would have been unbearable. Pictures from Iraq and Syria serve as a reminder to all the decision-makers in the region of the alternative. The decision to preempt the disintegration of Yemen and to prevent many human disasters in the country was courageous, but it may entail many risks nonetheless.

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