

Report

Geopolitical context of Operation Decisive Storm and GCC states' attitudes toward It



Geopolitical context of Operation Decisive Storm and the positions of GCC states towards it

Coalition forces caught the Houthis off guard when the hostilities began in Yemen. Likewise, the element of surprise was just as sudden for Iran, which at the time had been deeply involved in the negotiations with the 1+5 Group.

The timing of Operation Decisive Storm was as vital and as surprising as its sheer military might, it came:

- Just before Iran signed the initial deal over its nuclear program
- Just before the Arab leaders convened for annual summit
- Just after the Houthis began their march on Aden
- Just after the Houthis were building up their military presence at Saudi borders

Positions of GCC states on ODS



Saudi Arabia

Took the lead of the coalition; stood at the forefront of the war against the Houthis



Qatar

All problems in the Arab World are for the Arabs to solve.



Bahrain

Feared that Houthi takeover of Yemen will embolden its Shiite's to takeover Bahrain.



Kuwait

Absolute and full support of GCC security, stability



UAE

Combating the Houthi rebellion necessary for GCC security



Oman

Geographical, tribal ties with Yemen, strong ties to Iran prevented ODS participation

The Military Objectives of Decisive Storm

- Prevent Iran from taking control of Yemen
- Thwart the Houthis' attempt to take Aden or control the Bab Al-Mandeb strait
- Restore legitimacy to the Yemeni state and institutions
- Force the Houthis to come back the table and start a genuine dialogue according to the GCC initiative

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Abstract

In the early hours of Thursday, 26 March 2015, Operation Decisive Storm, led by Saudi Arabia and with the participation of a number of GCC and regional countries, was launched in response to the request of the Yemeni president to 'provide immediate support by all necessary means to protect Yemen and its people from the aggression of Houthi militias backed by Iran'.

The success of Saudi Arabia in forming a nine-country military coalition in record time indicates that under King Salman the country is seeking to regain its position as an influential regional power, following the resolution of succession issues among the descendants of King Abdulaziz.

This report analyses the context, motivations and legitimacy of Operation Decisive Storm and its goals. It also analyses the GCC states' attitudes toward the action and its future prospects.

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia formed an Arab and Islamic coalition that began 'Operation Decisive Storm' against the Houthi rebels in Yemen and their allies, in order to restore the constitutional and political legitimacy in the country, represented by President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi and his government.

Early on Thursday, 26 March, from Washington DC, the Saudi ambassador to the United States Adel al-Jubeir announced the start of Operation Decisive Storm, led by Saudi Arabia and with the participation of a number of GCC and regional countries in response

to a direct request by Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi, the Yemeni president, who appealed to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to 'provide immediate support by all necessary means to protect Yemen and its people from the aggression of the Houthi militias backed by Iran'.⁽¹⁾

The success of Saudi Arabia in forming a nine-country military coalition in record time indicates that under King Salman, the country is seeking to regain its status as an influential regional power, following the resolution of succession issues among the descendants of King Abdulaziz. New young leaders have already entered Saudi leadership. The most prominent were the deputy crown prince and interior minister, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, and the defence minister and head of the royal court, Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Operation Decisive Storm has raised a number of questions about whether it is a defensive or an offensive war, the reasons behind the participation of GCC countries (with the exception of Oman) and its goals. The operation also raised questions about Iran's position, potential scenarios, and military and political developments in the coming period.

Therefore, this paper analyses the context, motivations and legitimacy of the military operation dubbed 'Operation Decisive Storm' and its goals. It will then present and analyse GCC states' attitudes toward the operation, and highlight its future prospects.

Operation Decisive Storm: a Defensive Necessity or a Pre-emptive War?

After the Houthis conquered all structures of the Yemeni state and gained control of the capital Sana'a, they issued a constitutional declaration on 6 February 2015, in what constituted a coup against President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi.⁽²⁾ In addition, the Houthis made repeated attempts to seize the city of Aden, the southern capital, where Hadi and a number of his aides and his ministers fled on 20 February 2015. The Houthis also made efforts to gain control of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which connects to the Red Sea and through which ships cross to the Port of Aqaba in Jordan and the Suez Canal in Egypt.

In response to Houthi actions, Hadi made official requests for intervention by the GCC countries, including military intervention, after the international community, represented by international organisations, particularly the United Nations, and regional organisations, including the GCC and the Arab League, failed to find a peaceful solution to the crisis in Yemen.⁽³⁾

In the weeks prior to the coalition's announcement of the start of military operations in Yemen, GCC states had not succeeded, by mid-February 2015, in issuing a UN Security Council resolution on Yemen, namely, to impose sanctions on those hindering the process of political transition in the country. A resolution would have allowed for the possibility of using military force – under Chapter VII of the UN Charter – against the illegal seizure of power by the Houthis and their allies.

It seems that the military exercises conducted by the Houthis two weeks before the Operation Decisive Storm near the Saudi southern borders, using live ammunition and medium and heavy weapons,(4) had compelled the leadership of the Saudi-led military coalition to move up the timing of the operation. The Saudi's felt the Houthi drills constituted a risk of a direct threat to the security of their country and those of their neighbours in the GCC.

Thus, the military operation was, according to the governments in the coalition, inevitable and necessary to maintain national and regional security. Coalition countries felt that there was an imminent threat to their security based on past experience with the Houthi group, which had in November 2009, attacked Saudi territory.(5) Therefore, Operation Decisive Storm can be considered a pre-emptive war in anticipation of a repeat of the Houthi aggression that took place in Saudi territory six years ago.

It should be noted that Operation Decisive Storm was launched a few days ahead of the anticipated date (end March 2015) of the signing of an important Framework Agreement on Tehran's nuclear program between the countries of the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany) and Iran. The operation also coincided with the Arab ministerial meeting, which preceded the regular Arab Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt. Accordingly, the date set for the beginning of the military operation in Yemen could be linked to those two events and possibly in order to affect the resulting outcomes.

Legitimate action or foreign intervention?

The announcement of the start of military operations by the coalition of Arab and Islamic countries against the Houthi group and their allies in Yemen has raised controversy about the war's legitimacy.

Those opposing the operation consider it an aggressive war, and an intervention into the domestic affairs of other countries. Some even went further than that and cited articles from the constitutions of particular GCC states, which prohibit offensive wars and stipulate that their foreign policy principles are based on non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.(6)

However, the coalition countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and other GCC states participating in the coalition, consider Operation Decisive Storm a defensive war. This is because the GCC governments think that the undermining of security in Yemen through an illegitimate coup, which was fostered by the GCC initiative in 2011, and the Houthi group's threat to national security will, undoubtedly, pose a threat to the security of neighbouring countries, on the one hand, and global peace and security, on the other.(7)

Therefore, the legitimacy of the coalition's declaration of the war against the Houthi group, according to a preliminary analysis of the developments, derives from at least four legal sources. **They are:**

- **Article 51 of the UN Charter**, which stipulates that 'nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security'.(8)
- **The Joint Arab Defence Treaty:** On 13 April 1950, the Arab League approved the Joint Defence Treaty, which was ratified by all Arab countries that had gained independence after the Second World War. According to this treaty, all Arab states are committed to helping any member country that is under threat or attack by all means, including military means.(9)
- **GCC Defence Strategy:** The 30th GCC Summit, held in Kuwait on 15 December 2009, adopted the Defence Strategy, which was endorsed by GCC commanders-in-chief and defence ministers.(10) The strategy represents a quantum leap in joint defence cooperation among member states of the GCC system, and established the concept of developing defensive self-reliance.
- **The formal request submitted by the president of Yemen**, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who appealed to GCC leaders to 'provide immediate support by all necessary means, including military intervention, to protect Yemen and its people from continuous Houthi aggression and deter the expected attack to occur at any hour on the city of Aden.(11)

In this context, it is worth noting that even after they had announced the beginning of military operations in Yemen, GCC states (except Oman) are still pushing for a resolution

of the UN Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter in order to take the necessary measures to maintain international peace and security.⁽¹²⁾ GCC states also informed the Security Council about the measures they had taken on the basis of their right to self-defence, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.

Goals of Operation Decisive Storm

Any observer of the rapidly unfolding events in the south of the Arabian Peninsula will reach the conclusion that Operation Decisive Storm aimed to achieve the following goals:

- Deter Iran as a regional power and prevent it from dominating Yemen and making it a platform to influence the southern Arabian Peninsula, especially after Tehran succeeded in forcing its way into other Arab countries directly, as in Iraq and Syria, and indirectly via its allies in Lebanon.
- Stop the expansion of Houthi group throughout Yemen, and prevent it from taking over the city of Aden where the Hadi government is currently operating and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which is considered a lifeline for both the Jordanian Port of Aqaba and the Egyptian Suez Canal.
- Restore legitimacy to the Yemeni state institutions that have been seized by the Houthis after their issuance of a constitutional declaration, which constituted an illegitimate coup in the country.
- Force the Houthi group to return to the negotiating table, according to the principles agreed upon by the Yemeni parties in the GCC initiative signed in Riyadh in November 2011.

Attitudes of GCC Countries toward Operation Decisive Storm

The attitudes adopted by GCC countries are based on a set of objective considerations. They are as follows:

Qatar

Qatar was among the first countries to announce its participation in the Saudi-led military coalition to restore legitimacy in Yemen and stop the expansion of the Houthis, who seemed to be a stone's throw away from Aden and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, one of the most important waterways in the world.

Doha's stance is consistent with the vision presented by Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the emir of Qatar, during his recent visit to Washington DC, on 24–27 February 2015. It stems from the principle that Arabs are the owners of the land, and they are the

first to be concerned with finding solutions to the problems and dilemmas they face, and those with capacity should cooperate with each other.(13)

The approach adopted by Qatar has translated on the ground in Yemen as the adoption of all possible options in order to establish peace and security in the region. This includes dialogue, diplomatic solutions and finally military action, as required by the situation on the ground.

In his address to Arab leaders during the 26th Arab Summit in Sharm El-Sheikh on 28 March 2015, the Qatari emir said: "The recent events which were perpetrated by Ansar Allah group in collaboration with the former president are an assault on the peaceful transition process in Yemen. They vacated the results of the national dialogue of its content, confiscated the political legitimacy and broke down the State institutions, and the most dangerous of all, they sow the seeds of a newly introduced hateful phenomenon in Yemen – political sectarianism. Therefore, the Ansar Allah militia movement and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh are responsible for the recent escalation, which led to the launch of the Operation Decisive Storm".(14)

Based on this, Sheikh Tamim called on all parties and political forces to prioritise Yemen's interests and its people, and respect the legitimacy of President Hadi and his globally-recognised government by withdrawing militias from the state institutions and public places, and working to complete the implementation of the political process. He also called for standing by the legitimate government in Yemen and rejecting the policy of imposing fait accompli in order to maintain the unity, security and stability of Yemen.

Bahrain

The speech of the Bahraini monarch King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa during the recent Arab Summit in Egypt indicated that the most serious challenges currently faced by Arab nations was the deepening situation in Yemen and the rapidly unfolding developments which had taken place in a way that put Arab national security at risk. This, he said, led to Bahrain's response to the call of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to meet the request of the Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi for an immediate military intervention to restore security, stability and legitimacy in Yemen.(15) He added that Manama's involvement was out of its commitment to safeguarding global security and peace, and ensuring the security of marine navigation and international trade, particularly after all means and regional and international efforts to contain the crisis, most notably the GCC initiative and its executive mechanisms, approved by all Yemenis, had been exhausted.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the Kingdom of Bahrain has been facing – from early 2011 – a popular protest movement, which Iran is accused of fuelling by supporting the Bahraini Shia. From this perspective, Bahrain's participation in the

military coalition can be linked to its political leadership's conviction that the Houthi seizure of all aspects of the Yemeni state is not aimed at engulfing Yemen only, but also at undermining the security and stability of the Arab GCC states, in order to blackmail them and damage Arab national security as a whole.

Thus, it was no longer possible to ignore the situation and its dramatic results, which brought Yemen to the brink of the abyss, and on the brink of a devastating civil war, especially after the Houthis captured a number of ports, roads, and sea lanes, and had the capacity to seize large amounts of weapons.

Undoubtedly, the Bahraini leadership was also aware that Iran was behind the support received by the Houthi militias from abroad. It also feared that Tehran might do the same thing in Bahrain by providing some of the opposition sides with weapons or other forms of support, which may cause trouble or destabilise the security of the country.

Kuwait

Kuwait was one of the first GCC countries to join the coalition forces under the umbrella of the operation since its start date.

The deputy prime minister and minister of interior for Kuwait Sheikh Mohammed Al-Khalid Al-Sabah were among the GCC officials who attended the Riyadh meeting on 21 March 2015. The meeting, which is believed to have finalised the decision to declare the coalition forces of the operation, was also attended by the Qatari prime minister and interior minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser Al Thani; the crown prince of Bahrain, Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa; the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan; the deputy crown prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Nayef Al-Saud; and the Saudi minister of defence, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud. It was held under the auspices of the King of Saudi Arabia, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. (16)

What distinguishes the Kuwaiti attitude in this regard is that Kuwait is adopting a foreign policy that allows it to play the role of a mediator. This role was evident in the role played in the crisis of the withdrawal of GCC ambassadors from Doha in March 2014. On the other hand, Kuwait owes much to its fellow GCC countries with respect to their attitude toward its ordeal during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and after the Kuwait War in 1991. This is an essential factor in the stances taken by the government of Kuwait regarding its relations with neighbouring countries.

United Arab Emirates

The announcement of Operation Decisive Storm was widely supported and welcomed among UAE circles, which was reflected in statements made by UAE officials, experts and analysts. This indicates a backing for the move that was taken in response to the

request of the Yemeni president. It also indicates a desire to ward off any potential dangers that may pose a threat to the GCC states' security.

In this regard, it is useful to cite the statement made by Anwar Gargash, the UAE's minister of state for foreign affairs, who said that although the launch of the military operation in Yemen was a difficult decision, it had become a necessity to 'confront the Houthi aggression and rebellion, and the strategic threat it posed to the GCC'.⁽¹⁷⁾ The UAE official also affirmed that the strategic shift in the region in favour of Iran, enabled by the Houthis, could no longer be tolerated or ignored. He stressed that Houthi encroachment had exhausted all the available political options. He said GCC security was integral and indivisible, and that the security of Yemen was part of that regional security. Thus, the UAE's supportive stance toward Operation Decisive Storm can be explained within the context of the country's desire to promote and safeguard the security and safety of the GCC against any potential dangers.

The UAE's position was characterised by its direct communication channels with Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh – the son of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, an ally to the Houthis and one of the crisis parties – before the launch of Operation Decisive Storm. Ahmed Saleh was then the Yemeni ambassador to Abu Dhabi, according to the settlement brokered by the GCC (the GCC initiative) in 2011 which led to Saleh's resignation in return for a number of privileges and immunity granted to him, his aids and relatives. Therefore, and in accordance with diplomatic norms, the UAE ministry of foreign affairs had open communication channels with then ambassador Ahmed Saleh, who was recently dismissed by President Hadi. Perhaps this explains the statement of the UAE's minister of state for foreign affairs, who said that the decision to take military action 'was not hasty, but was preceded by intense political efforts and sincere initiatives that were responded to by ingratitude and aggression. We decided on this remedy only after having knocked on all doors'.⁽¹⁸⁾

Oman

Oman did not participate in the Decisive Storm coalition. Perhaps the statement issued by the five GCC states that are participating in the coalition, and which was distributed by the Saudi Press Agency, is self-explanatory. It answers the question that some asked about the reason why the statement was not issued from the Secretariat-General of the GCC.

The most important reasons that prevented Oman from participating in the "decisive" coalition are as follows:⁽¹⁹⁾

1. The 'self-distancing' principle pursued by Oman as one of the features of its foreign policy. It does not allow other countries to interfere in its internal affairs

and distances itself from involvement in any external military action unless there is a direct danger that could threaten its national security.

2. The desire of the GCC countries involved in the coalition to keep Oman a 'neutral actor' and remain an acceptable place for Yemeni parties, which could host a future dialogue that brings them together.
3. The geographical, tribal and social interlock between Oman and Yemen. The long borders between the two countries and the kinship relations between Yemeni citizens and their counterparts in Oman may be embarrassing for the sultanate should it participate in any military action on the Yemeni territory.
4. The close and long-standing ties that bind Oman and Iran should not be overlooked as a factor. Oman's non-participation in the coalition may be due to the unwillingness of Muscat to destabilise its relations with Tehran.

Conclusion

Coalition forces shocked the Houthi group and its allies when they announced the start of military operations in Yemen. The surprise element also affected Iran, which was then busy negotiating with the P5+1 over its nuclear program. At the time, Tehran was about to sign a Framework Agreement in Lausanne, Switzerland.

In contrast, Iran's response was neither furious nor hasty. On the contrary, the response was calm and called for a cessation of hostilities and return to the negotiating table. It seemed as if Tehran was leaving its Houthi ally to face its fate in this battle, under the air strikes of the coalition forces. Tehran then called on Oman to play the role of mediator in this crisis. The crucial question is: how will Iran react in case the coalition forces do not respond to its calls? In this case, there are two main two scenarios:

1. Tehran may seek to move to another front outside Yemen by fuelling sectarian strife in various places, especially in some GCC states in which the Shia component represents a key element of society, such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.
2. Iran may react through another party such as those actors with influence in the international community, especially Russia and China, who are both permanent members of the UN Security Council and have close ties with Tehran. This can be seen in the draft resolution submitted by Russia to the Security Council in parallel with the resolution put forward by the five GCC states participating in the ten-country coalition. (20)

On the other hand, the coalition forces are, at this stage, unlikely to launch a direct ground offensive to resolve the battle against the Houthis and supporters of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. However, they may do so if they sense the risk of the fall of the city of Aden is in the hands of the Houthis, or the possibility of Houthi takeover of

ports overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which is considered one of the most important marine waterways in the world.

Yet, facts on the ground indicate that the coalition forces seek to provide logistical support and weapons to the Yemeni Popular Resistance Committees and tribes that oppose the Houthis and the ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The aim is to speed up the resolution of the battle on the ground. Therefore, this may be the most pragmatic option and the least expensive for the coalition forces.

Finally, the question posed by many political forces in Yemen – whether the international community will back President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi in the post-operation phase – should not be overlooked.

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End Notes

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