



INSS Insight No. 680, April 1, 2015

The Struggle in Yemen: A Test for the Arab Collective

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While the action of the Arab coalition in Yemen may be in its initial stage, it is already possible to draw some conclusions and assess their significance for Israel and the region.

One, it has been a long time since Arab countries managed to unite for the sake of taking substantive action, especially military, in order to defend their own interests. However, Iran's efforts to penetrate various arenas and expand its influence throughout the region are an ominous threat to at least some Arab states. Therefore, one can already speak of a collective Arab achievement in light of the Arab nations' ability to come together to deal with the inherent threat – as they see it – of increased Iranian influence in the region. If the military action against the Houthis and their supporters in Yemen succeeds, it may represent the first of other joint military actions.

Two, the Arab collective was willing to embark on a significant military move even without the leadership of the United States, which was not always the case, even when Arab interests were at stake. Now, having no choice, Arab governments led the way when they perceived a clear and present danger to their states' security. That said, it is important to recognize that the fight is against a non-state actor with limited powers and in an arena that is on Saudi Arabia's doorstep (while the Houthis are enjoying not inconsiderable Iranian assistance, for example, they are light years away from having attained the same capabilities as Hizbollah).

Three, in its drive to isolate the nuclear issue from other developments and reach a nuclear deal with Iran, the United States has once again taken a back seat regarding Yemen. Indeed, the administration announced it would not raise the issue of Iran's involvement in Yemen with the Iranians during the nuclear negotiations. While it is possible to understand the Obama administration's behind the scenes involvement in the operation out of its desire to reduce US military involvement in the Middle East, the administration's public statements on the events in Yemen were relatively weak and its military involvement was decidedly low signature: intelligence provision and logistical assistance (search and rescue) to the Arab forces.

Given that the administration made it clear that it does not want to link Yemen to the nuclear talks, the negotiations will likely not be significantly affected by regional tensions created by developments in Yemen and renewed attention to Iranian involvement in Arab states. Nonetheless, the administration is in an uncomfortable position, having to explain its efforts to make rapid progress toward a nuclear agreement when Iran's deep involvement in the affairs of other nations is exposed yet again and when an important segment of the Arab world is squaring off against Iran.

Furthermore, the operation has demonstrated the economic and political clout that the Gulf states wield in the Arab world. They still need military assistance and political backing from other Arab nations, first and foremost Egypt, in order to score legitimacy and military assistance for their actions, but since the regional upheavals began their authority in the Middle East has grown. The Egyptian military remains the strongest among Arab militaries, but because of the internal Egyptian shockwaves of recent years the el-Sisi regime needs the massive economic assistance coming from the Gulf states. Moreover, leaving the Bab el-Mandeb Strait – the strategic naval passageway to the Suez Canal – free and clear of Iranian influence is also a critical interest of the el-Sisi regime.

Complementing the current Arab activism and cohesion, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, which for many years was characterized by relative passivity has – indeed, since the outset of the upheavals that swept through the Arab world in recent years, and evident in the entry of Saudi forces into Bahrain in 2011 – evinced new vitality. Moreover, Riyadh has a new king who is more of an activist than his predecessor and is trying various means to unite the Arab and Sunni world to curb the spread of Iran's influence in the region. The king has scored not inconsiderable achievements, for example, in his ability to bring major Sunni rival sides – Turkey and Egypt – to support his moves in Yemen.

Yemen is not a prominent Arab state politically or economically. Rather, its importance lies in its location: its proximity to Saudi Arabia, with which it shares a 1,800 kilometer border, and its control of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait (the southern naval gate to the Suez Canal as well as to Israel). Yemen is also one of several arenas in which there the struggle over the nature of the Middle East continues between Iran and its satellites, on the one hand, and the Sunni monarchist bloc, on the other. From the Saudis' perspective, should Iran succeed in establishing its influence in Yemen, they will be surrounded by Iran, which could then more easily inflame the Zaidi Shiites within Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Yemen became a global arena for the war on radical Sunni terrorism once al-Qaeda established its major Arabian Peninsula base there.

These are the same reasons that for years Iran has made great effort to create a bastion of influence in Yemen on the basis of the Shiite connection to the Houthi rebels. After Iran established two hubs of influence aimed at the Mediterranean – in Lebanon via Hizbollah, and in the Gaza Strip via Hamas – it now seeks to create a similar locus of

influence in Yemen aimed at the Red Sea, intended to pressure Saudi Arabia not only from the northeast but also from the southwest. In fact, the mode of Iranian involvement in Yemen resembles the Iranian involvement in Iraq: assistance in the form of money, weapons, and military training to local armed militias in order to turn them into the major force in the country while relying on Iran. It is therefore clear that the military move, led by Saudi Arabia and with the participation of other Arab nations, is an undesirable development for Iran, because it is aimed largely at Iran's involvement in Yemen and might lead to additional *collective actions* elsewhere in areas of Iranian influence in the Arab sphere.

Finally, in going into battle, Saudi Arabia has taken a gamble, because at this point it cannot afford to emerge as the loser in a struggle at its own doorstep. Its military action is liable to invite a painful Iranian countermove, by either the Houthis or other elements. In recent years, Iran has not hesitated to try to attack Saudi assets, whether inside or outside the kingdom (e.g., the 2011 attempt on the life of the Saudi ambassador in the United States and the Iranian cyberattack that paralyzed Aramco's computer systems in 2012). In the current operation, Riyadh seeks to eradicate Iranian subversion on its southern border and deter further Iranian activities.

The Houthis cannot be defeated from the air, nor is this the objective. Saudi Arabia's major goal is to bring the Houthis back to the negotiating table over the future of Yemen by the application of military pressure. A secondary Saudi goal is to prevent the Houthis from using advanced weapons – fighter jets and surface-to-surface missiles – and keep the strategic port city of Aden from falling into their hands, which would spell the fall of all of Yemen.

It may be that in their rapid conquests, the Houthis have prompted the rise of forces stronger than their own, which could result in damage to their troops and their retreat. Perhaps had they been less greedy, they would have been able to digest all of Yemen with much greater ease. Saudi Arabia's chances of forcing the Houthis back are higher than its ability to operate against Iran's satellites in other arenas, if only because of its close familiarity with different elements in Yemeni society and politics and its geographical proximity to Yemen. But the Saudis must be quick and efficient in exploiting their military and political momentum to try to reach a political settlement, while also providing the Houthis with a greater say in Yemen than before. Otherwise, Riyadh is liable to find itself mired in Yemen. The Yemeni test of Saudi Arabia may therefore be summed up as follows: attaining a military achievement that will lead to a political settlement that the kingdom can tolerate. A settlement in which the Houthis get even half of what they want would constitute a tough blow to Iran and might even provide a tailwind to the forces fighting Iran in other arenas.

Lastly, the Saudi-led collective move entails a significant advantage for Israel. The move focuses the world's attention on Iran's involvement in other nations in the Middle East and its growing influence in the region, and it demonstrates that the threat coming from Iran is not limited to its nuclear aspirations but is also manifested in its stark ambition to become the regional hegemon. It is thus not inconceivable that the move will help create shared interests between Israel and the member nations of the Saudi coalition.

