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SAUDI ARABIAN NIGHTMARES

Eckart Woertz, Senior Research Fellow CIDOB

The military intervention of Saudi Arabia in Yemen marks a departure from its traditional checkbook diplomacy and reveals a heightened sense of urgency after a string of setbacks. Saudi Arabia is in a rival bid for regional hegemony with Iran with increasingly sectarian undertones. Shiite dominated governments in Baghdad, restive Shiite populations in Bahrain and the Saudi Eastern province, Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon, the traditional alliance between the Assad regime and Iran and the latter's support of the Houthi rebellion in Yemen are perceived by Saudi Arabia as an encroachment. Local origins of such conflicts tend to be overlooked and Iran's role in them tends to be overstated, but perceptions matter. Conflicts are increasingly framed in sectarian terms, which in turn adds fuel to the fire.

As an oil rich state with a vast territory and limited military capabilities, Saudi Arabia is no stranger to challenges to its sovereignty. In the 1960s Arab socialists questioned its legitimacy and it engaged in a proxy war in Yemen with Nasserite Egypt. Iran supported unrest among the Shiite population in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province in the 1980s after the Islamic Revolution. In 1990 Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and threatened the kingdom. In the battle of Khafji in early 1991 Iraqi troops even attacked Saudi territory.

Saudi Arabia's strategies for regime survival have involved US security guarantees, the funding of regional proxies and the appeal to a pan-Islamic ideology of fundamentalist Wahhabism. All three strategies have shown recent weaknesses. Saudi Arabia's attempts to topple the Assad regime, which it regards as an Iranian client, have failed. It could not prompt the US to intervene after the Syrian regime used chemical weapons against its own population and a rapprochement between the US and Iran in the wake of a nuclear agreement could threaten Saudi Arabia's standing as a regional American ally.

The aggressive campaign for regime change in Syria by Prince Bandar bin Sultan who was appointed as head of Saudi intelligence in July 2012 equally failed. Bandar resigned in April 2014. Gulf countries poured hundreds of millions into the Syrian civil war during 2012 and 2013, often in competition with each other. Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular tried to build up their own client bases and jealously shielded them from each other's influence. The haphazard and broad based funding efforts via middlemen without real capacity to follow up and control

contributed to disarray of rebel forces and lack of strategic or even tactical coordination. While it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf governments have funded ISIS directly, ISIS has benefitted indirectly from this spending spree when fighters who had originally been with other groups joined it and brought their experience and weapons with them.

Hence, the Saudi campaign for regime change in Syria failed to achieve its objectives and threatens to backfire. ISIS, like the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, has put alternative pan-Islamic narratives forward. It openly questions Saudi Arabia's legitimacy with a fundamentalist ideology that bears similarities with Saudi Wahhabism. It attacked a Saudi border post in January, killing two soldiers and one General. Saudi Arabia also has to fear backlash from returning jihadists, like in the 2000's when Saudi veterans of the Afghan war launched a terror campaign inside the country. Saudi Arabia has participated in Allied air attacks against ISIS, has declared harsh sentences against its citizens who went to fight in Syria and has declared ISIS a terrorist organization in March 2014.

With a lot of financial aid, Saudi Arabia has managed to stabilize the Egyptian officer regime, but it is currently without credible ally in the Arabian heartland of Syria and Iraq. It has cultivated a relationship of deep mistrust with consecutive governments in Baghdad. The late king Abdullah told the U.S. to **"cut off the head of the snake" when talking about Iran and regarded former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki as an Iranian agent according to a wikileaks cable**. Maliki reciprocated by openly accusing Saudi Arabia of funding Sunni insurgents in Iraq. Only recently the relationship has mellowed with the Saudi invitation to the new Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi to visit Riyadh in March 2015.

If that was not enough, Saudi Arabia's standing in Yemen has deteriorated as well and has now pushed it to the unusual step of direct military involvement. Saudi paranoia about its impoverished, but populous neighbour that has the third highest firearms density per capita in the world goes back a long way. The Saudi founding king Abdulaziz allegedly said on his deathbed in 1953 that then divided Yemen should never be allowed to unite. When it happened anyway in 1990, Saudi Arabia tried to thwart the reunification unsuccessfully by supporting southern secessionists in the Yemeni civil war of 1994. The transition process that it tried to broker in 2011 after Arab Spring like uprisings in Yemen now lies in tatters. Former President Saleh who at that time went to Riyadh for treatment after an assassination attempt has now cast his lot with the Houthi rebellion. The current President Hadi whom Saudi Arabia is backing is a weak figure. The country is being torn apart by Shiite rebellion, southern secessionists, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the machinations of the former establishment around Saleh.

The chances that Saudi Arabia could bring order in this chaos are slim. Air strikes alone will not be able to influence events decisively. A ground invasion would entail incalculable risks in the rugged terrain of Yemen. It is questionable whether Saudi Arabia and its ten regional allies whose support it has enlisted would be able to accomplish such a daunting enterprise. Saudi Arabia was the largest arms importer of the world in 2014, yet its military capabilities are compromised by lack of training, maintenance and unit cohesion. Saudi royalty has also been anxious to limit the military's ability to launch a coup, which has curtailed its effectiveness. **The performance of the Saudi army during previous border engagements with Houthi rebels in 2009** has not been judged favorably by international experts. It looks like Saudi Arabia will need to brace for a period of heightened regional insecurity in the future.