

“Decisive Storm”: Saudi Arabia’s attack on the Houthis in Yemen

By Stig Stenslie

■ Executive summary

On March 26th 2015, Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes on the Houthis and their allies in Yemen. The operation, “Decisive Storm”, was supported by a coalition of Sunni Muslim countries. The military campaign was initiated after Yemeni President ‘Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, on March 25th, asked the UN Security Council for assistance in stopping Houthi militia advancing towards Aden. For Saudi Arabia’s new king, Salman, the military operation is beneficial for several reasons. First, the king hopes that the campaign against the Houthis will strengthen the standing of his son, Muhammad bin Salman, and that a successful end result will make the young prince respected as an effective leader. Second, Salman sees the attack on the Houthis – portrayed as clients of Iran – as an opportunity to rally support among Saudis for the new king and the monarchy. Third, by building a broad coalition behind the military campaign, King Salman seeks to establish Saudi hegemony in the Sunni Muslim world. The operation against the Yemeni Houthis reflects Saudi Arabia’s new adventurous, militaristic foreign policy, and comes with great risk. Hence, the new foreign policy doctrine is controversial within the royal family, and Salman’s decision to attack the Houthis was contested.

Introduction

On March 26th 2015, Saudi Arabia launched airstrikes on the Houthis and their allies in Yemen. The operation, “*Asifatul al-Hazm*” or “Decisive Storm”, was supported by a coalition of Sunni Muslim countries, including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (except Oman), Morocco, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan. The U.S. provided logistics and intelligence and has a joint planning cell with the Saudis. The military campaign was initiated after Yemeni President ‘Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, on March 25th, asked the UN Security Council for assistance to stop Houthi militia advancing towards Aden. Until recently, Hadi had been staying in Aden, but has now fled to his allies in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia’s stated goal is to “protect the legitimate government of Yemen” (i.e. Hadi as Yemen’s legitimate president), and to stop the Houthi movement claimed by the Saudis to be a “terrorist organisation” backed by Iran. For Saudi Arabia’s new king, Salman bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al Sa’ud, the military operation is beneficial for the following several reasons.

Grooming the special prince

First, it is likely that the king, through the operation, hopes to consolidate the position of his favoured son, Muhammad bin Salman, who, in the wake of the royal succession in January, was named chief of the royal court, the world’s

youngest defence minister and head of the newly established Council of Economic and Development Affairs. This representation of the prince is underlined by the government-controlled Saudi media portrayal of the young prince as “commander in chief”, who decisively leads the attacks on their neighbouring country to the south. The media has published numerous photos of him engaging in activities such as directing the war from his office, visiting soldiers on the battlefield and sitting in the cockpit of a fighter jet, among others.

Within the royal family, as well as among ordinary Saudis, many reacted negatively to the appointment of the young Prince Muhammad bin Salman – who is in his early 30s – to these prominent positions by his father. Some claim that Muhammad bin Salman has far too much influence over his father, and express fears that he will become a very powerful gatekeeper as the 82-year-old king’s health deteriorates further. He is also accused by some of being corrupt. There is a tendency amongst Saudi kings to have a favourite son, often the youngest born, creating a source of jealousy and discontent within the royal house.

By giving so much power to Muhammad bin Salman, the king bypassed his older sons, who are placed in far less important positions, not to mention a number of older and

far more experienced nephews, specifically commander of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, Mitab bin 'Abd Allah, and Foreign Minister Sa'ud Al Faysal. In terms of age, experience and reputation, there is also a wide gap between Muhammad bin Salman and his elder cousin, 55-year-old Muhammad bin Nayif, who is deputy crown prince, interior minister and head of the Council of Political and Security Affairs.

Through the military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, King Salman arguably aims to strengthen the standing of Muhammad bin Salman and make the young prince respected among his half brothers and cousins as an effective leader, allowing him to stand on equal footing with his older cousin Muhammad bin Nayif.

Playing the nationalist card

Second, there are good reasons for believing that King Salman, through the military operation, is playing the nationalist card. Salman probably sees the attack on the Yemeni Houthis – whom the Saudis portray as clients of Iran – as an opportunity to rally support among Saudis for the king and the monarchy. This is important, as the king is facing considerable challenges at home – a wide range of cultural, socio-economical and political concerns – and there are few issues that unite the divided Saudi nation. Moreover, the military operation serves as an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to flex its military muscles and restore “honour” after the humiliation of the “defeat” against the Assad regime and Iran in Syria.

The threat of Iran, coupled with the deep-rooted Shia-phobia of Wahhabi Islam, is one of the few issues that has the potential to unite broad segments of the Saudi population. King Salman's aggressive action addresses Saudi public opinion that is increasingly concerned about Iranian power surrounding the kingdom, perceived Saudi impotence in the face of this power and the downscaled presence of the U.S. in the Middle East, thus leaving the region vulnerable allowing Iran to expand its power.

The fact that the government has acted is now a source of broad public pride within the kingdom. Saudi press is backing the military operation unequivocally. “We see this as brotherly support for our neighbours in Yemen”, an op-ed in *Arab News* stated, with a large cartoon of war-planes scattering rats in a desert. On Twitter – a useful barometer to measure popular trends in Saudi Arabia – nationalistic tweets abound, supporting the kingdom's military action against Houthis in Yemen. The popular cleric Salman al-'Awda tweeted his support for the military operation with references to the “acute need to shore up growing Iranian regional influence”.

Establishing hegemony in the Sunni world

Third, by building a broad coalition behind the military campaign, King Salman seeks to establish Saudi hegemony

in the Sunni Muslim world. The Saudis are alarmed by Iran's presence in Iraq and Syria and are terrified by the prospect of a U.S. nuclear deal with Iran. Like other GCC governments, Saudi Arabia feels increasingly surrounded both geographically and politically by Tehran's growing regional allies and influence, and fears that a nuclear agreement will further strengthen Iran's power in the Middle East.

The war against the Houthis has been brewing for months, and, since coming to power, Salman has consulted with leaders of, among others, the other Gulf monarchies, Jordan, Egypt, Turkey and Pakistan, with the aim of creating a Sunni bloc. As the military operation shows, the king has succeeded in setting up an alliance with considerable military capacity. According to Saudi media, more than 100,000 Saudi troops, including members of the Saudi security ministries Ministry of Defence, Saudi Arabian National Guard, Ministry of Interior and General Intelligence Presidency, and Pakistanis, are in southern Asir and Jizan provinces. The media also reports that these troops are supported by over 100 Saudi fighter jets, plus 30 United Arab Emirates fighter jets, 15 each from Bahrain and Kuwait, 10 from Qatar and 6 from Jordan, as well as the presence of Pakistan and Egypt air and naval forces. On March 29th, the heads of the Arab League countries agreed to the creation of a joint military force – which has long been an ambition of the 22 member states, but had proved unattainable – that eventually could be deployed to bring stability to Yemen. The creation of this force was a major success for King Salman and demonstrated Saudi leadership in the Arab world.

Beyond its rhetorical support for the Houthis in Yemen, it is unclear the extent to which Tehran has in fact supported them militarily, through either weapons assistance or military training. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has felt an acute need to draw a red line in its own backyard and to set an example for Iran. Iran, for its part, has condemned the attack, but it is unlikely that the country will involve itself in the conflict. This is because Iran has limited military capabilities, given the country's heavy involvement in Syria and Iraq, as well as the ongoing nuclear negotiations in which Tehran aims to reach an end result that eases the sanctions against the country.

Big game, big gamble

Saudi Arabia's operation against the Yemen Houthis is a continuation of the adventurous, militaristic foreign policy initiated by the late King 'Abd Allah, but it is on a larger scale and has far greater risk. Under 'Abd Allah, the kingdom cast off half a century of caution and restraint in regional security affairs and decided to use its own muscles to protect national interests and reduce its long-standing security dependence on the U.S. The kingdom's preferred instruments of foreign policy were traditionally diplomacy, money and religion. Over the past six years, more or less in parallel with the reduction of U.S. military

presence in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has undertaken smaller-scale military campaigns in neighbouring countries, beginning with the 2009 war against Houthi rebels in northern Yemen, followed by the deployment of Saudi troops into Bahrain to shore up the regime there early on in the Arab Spring, and then the recent anti-ISIL campaign in Iraq.

Not only Saudi Arabia but also the UAE and Qatar have flexed their military muscles in recent years and participated in air operations in war-torn countries as far away as Libya. The rich Gulf kingdoms are among the world's largest defence spenders, and it is reasonable to believe that they have a desire to participate in conflicts to acquire operational experience.

The new foreign policy approach, referred to as a "doctrine" by Nawaf Obaid at Harvard University's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, is controversial within the royal family, and King Salman's decision to attack the Houthis was contested. The king's decision to act was taken only after extensive discussions, in which the arguments of his son and defence minister, Muhammad bin Salman, prevailed over those of the veteran foreign minister Sa'ud Al Faysal. Within the royal family, there is a rift between younger princes, represented by Muhammad bin Salman and Muhammad bin Nayif, who keep pushing for a more proactive foreign policy, and older princes, fronted by Sa'ud Al Faysal, who is an advocate of "the old thinking" of diplomacy. The younger princes have long been frustrated with the way the old guard has implemented and exercised policy, and the attack against Yemeni Houthis indicates that the younger generation has gained greater influence over foreign policy.

Sa'ud Al Faysal's reluctance is understandable, because of the huge risk inherent in this military operation. The list of things that could go wrong for the Saudis is daunting.

The Saudis could simply fail, enabling the Houthis to take full control of Yemen. That would be a spectacular embarrassment – in particular for the king's son, Muhammad bin Salman – and it cannot be ruled out, as the Saudi armed forces have minimal combat experience. The military

intervention in Yemen in 2009 was a failure, which led to the disgrace of Prince Khalid bin Sultan who then commanded the Saudi forces. Significant collateral damage – which is a likely effect of the air campaign – will trigger international criticism directed against Saudi Arabia, a severe burden for the new king. Moreover, the bombing could have the negative effect of strengthening al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – the arch-enemy of Saudi Arabia – which previously has been fought by the Houthis. It might even open the scene for ISIL. The physical destruction of the already poverty-stricken Yemen caused by the air campaign increases the chance that the kingdom will confront the negative effects of a failed state across its porous southern border. Finally, although not very likely, Saudi Arabia's intervention could escalate the conflict into a regional proxy war. The longer the "Decisive Storm" rages, the more damage will be done to stability in and around the southern Arabian Peninsula.

Summary

In summary, King Salman's decision to attack the Houthi militia in Yemen addresses a number of urgent domestic political needs. It is plausible to believe that the king hopes that the military operation will strengthen the standing of his son, Muhammad bin Salman, and rally popular support among nationalist Saudis who are fearful of an expansionist Shia Iran. In addition, the king is arguably trying to use the campaign to establish Saudi hegemony in the Sunni Muslim world. The operation against the Yemeni Houthis reflects Saudi Arabia's new adventurous, militaristic foreign policy, and comes with huge risk. Therefore, the new foreign policy doctrine is controversial within the royal family, and Salman's decision to attack the Houthis was not an easy one to make. ■

■ THE AUTHOR

Stig Stenslie is Assistant Deputy General and Head of Asia Division of the Norwegian Defence Staff. He has held visiting fellowships at, among others, the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies in Oslo, the National University in Singapore and Columbia University in New York. He holds a doctorate on royal family politics in Saudi Arabia from the University of Oslo. He is the author of several publications on the contemporary Middle East and China, the most recent being, with Marte Kjær Galtung, *49 Myths About China* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), *Regime Stability in Saudi Arabia: The Challenge of Succession* (Routledge, 2011) and, with Kjetil Selvik, *Stability and Change in the Modern Middle East* (I.B. Tauris, 2011).

Disclaimer

The content of this publication is presented as is. The stated points of view are those of the author and do not reflect those of the organisation for which he works or NOREF. NOREF does not give any warranties, either expressed or implied, concerning the content.



- The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre
- Norsk ressurscenter for fredsbygging

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) is a resource centre integrating knowledge and experience to strengthen peacebuilding policy and practice. Established in 2008, it collaborates and promotes collaboration with a wide network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Norway and abroad.

Read NOREF's publications on www.peacebuilding.no and sign up for notifications.

Connect with NOREF on Facebook or @PeacebuildingNO on Twitter

Email: info@peacebuilding.no - Phone: +47 22 08 79 32