

‘Operation Decisive Storm’ and Changing Geopolitics in the Gulf

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May 26, 2015



Summary

The Saudi-led military operation in Yemen has not been able to bring back Hadi to power nor has it been able to completely drive the Houthis out of the capital. It has instead further exposed the deep political and sectarian polarization in the region. While both Saudi Arabia and Iran vie for power and influence, Yemenis continue to suffer and the country seems to be slipping into further instability. The solution to Yemen's problem lies in dialogue and negotiations between the parties concerned.

The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen 'Operation Decisive Storm' has further affected the fragile geopolitics of the Gulf region. It was intended to bring stability to Yemen by reinstating the government led by President Abdu Mansour Hadi and stopping the advance of the Houthis. Saudi Arabia left no stone unturned to make the operation a success. Along with its GCC neighbours (UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain), other Arab countries such as Jordan, Morocco, Egypt and Senegal were also drawn in to participate in the military operation. The United States has provided intelligence and logistical support for the operation.

By undertaking such a huge military operation in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has shown that it will not hesitate to use force to ensure security in its neighbourhood. Saudi intervention in Bahrain to suppress the protests in 2011 under the banner of 'Peninsula Shield Force' along with the forces from Qatar and UAE was another example of Saudi sensitivity to the instability in its neighbourhood.

Riyadh has also shown that it would not leave any space for Iranian influence, be it in Bahrain or in Yemen. The Houthis (allegedly supported by Iran and trained by Hezbollah) operating freely in Sanaa after forcing president Hadi out of the capital was not acceptable to Riyadh. Heavily armed Houthis on the top of open vehicles in the streets of Saana indicated an Iranian arrival in its backyard. In such a situation, Saudi Arabia felt it necessary to intervene in Yemen to prevent further deterioration of the situation.

President Hadi initially moved to Aden and then fled to Riyadh where he is now in exile. In an Op-Ed article in the *New York Times* on April 12, 2015, Hadi accused 'Iran's hunger for power and its ambition to control the entire region' as the root cause of chaos in Yemen.¹ Terming the Houthis as the puppets of Iran, Hadi appreciated the military efforts of Saudi Arabia and other partners. The Saudi-led military operation has impacted the regional geopolitics. The issue brief examines the emerging trends in the regional geopolitics as a result of this operation.

Saudi-Iran Tension

There are severe differences as well as interests between the two regional powers Iran and Saudi Arabia over the situation in Yemen. While Saudi Arabia supports the status quo in Yemen by supporting the Hadi government, Iran on its part has backed the Houthis.² The

¹ "Yemen's President: The Houthis Must Be Stopped", *New York Times*, April 12, 2015, at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/13/opinion/the-west-must-help-save-yemen.html?_r=0

² "Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister: Embassy Closures in Yemen Hasty but Purposeful", Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Iran, February 11, 2015, at <http://www.mfa.gov.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=2023&newsview=327431>

involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran brought to the fore the sectarian nature of the conflict, with Iran supporting the Houthis who belong to Shia sect and Saudis supporting the Hadi regime which is dominated by the Sunnis. Though the sectarian dimension in the political conflict in Yemen has historical roots, the direct military involvement by Saudi Arabia and the subsequent Iranian reaction to it has further exacerbated this division.

The Omani refusal

The Saudi-Iran rivalry in Yemen has drawn other countries of the region into the conflict thereby further spreading the impact of the conflict. The GCC member states such as the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain have openly supported the 'Operation Decisive Storm' thus strengthening the Saudi position and authority. The most remarkable feature has however been the Omani decision not to join the operation. Oman believes that the conflict in Yemen should be resolved through negotiations and dialogue between the parties concerned and that the external military intervention will not resolve the conflict. Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi stated that peace efforts and a military campaign 'do not meet'.³ Alawi further stated that 'Oman is not part of that campaign for simple reasons ... Oman is a nation of peace'.

Most of the Omanis follow the Ibadi sect of Islam. Therefore they do not want to be drawn into a regional conflict on the sectarian lines represented by Saudi Arabia and Iran. Like its neighbours Qatar and Saudi Arabia, Oman is also trying its hand in mediating regional conflicts. It has been successful in bringing Iran and US to the negotiating table over the Iranian nuclear issue. This has led to a creation of the Omani national image as a peaceful and neutral player in the region. To support the Saudi-led military operation would have led to a questioning of its credentials as a neutral player. In a region that is fragile and conflict prone, Oman intends to maintain a peaceful and non-interventionist foreign policy. Further, it will be at the receiving end if the conflict further escalates and refugees start flooding into Oman.

Pakistan refuses to join the operation

King Salman sought Pakistani help but the Pakistani parliament voted against joining the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Pakistan is an old friend and ally of Saudi Arabia with strong military ties between the two countries. There seems to be a number of reasons behind the Pakistani refusal to join the operation in Yemen. Though Pakistan has been a trusted ally of Saudi Arabia, lately it has been trying to engage with Iran for several reasons. Pakistan is

³ "Yemen combatants not ready for talks, says neighbour Oman", *Reuters*, April 2, 2015, at <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/04/02/yemen-security-oman-idUKL6N0WZ3E720150402>

trying to balance its engagements with Saudi Arabia and Iran as it has substantial long term interests with both the countries.

The Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline (also known as the 'Peace Pipeline') is one of the major Pakistani interests with Iran. Pakistan and Iran also look forward to their cooperation in Afghanistan which is strategically important for both. Thus, for Pakistan, participating in the Saudi-led operation would have meant directly confronting Iranian interests in the Gulf region. Further, given the sectarian tensions prevailing in their own country, participating in an operation alongside Saudi Arabia would have sent a different signal to its own domestic population as well.

While declining Saudi request for military support, Pakistani parliament offered to mediate in the Yemeni conflict and help in the dialogue process. This was not however what Riyadh expected from Pakistan at the crucial juncture. Pakistani participation would have certainly strengthened the Saudi position but its refusal has come as a shock for Riyadh. In the aftermath of the Pakistani decision, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Riyadh on April 23, 2015 along with his Defence Minister and Army Chief. By undertaking the visit, Pakistan wanted to reassure its commitment towards Saudi security as well as towards the relationship.

Zarif visits Oman and Pakistan

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif visited Oman and Pakistan – two countries not supporting the Saudi-led Operation Decisive Storm in Yemen. Iran has tried to capitalise on the Pakistani decision. Zarif was in Pakistan from April 9-10 and met Prime Minister Sharif and Army Chief Raheel Sharif. Both countries reportedly discussed the situation in Yemen among other bilateral issues. By visiting Pakistan when the Saudi operation was continuing, Zarif wanted to gently persuade Pakistan towards an Iranian sphere of influence while at the same time sending a strong signal to Riyadh. His visit to Pakistan may also create further fissures in the Saudi-Pakistan relationship.

Zarif visited Pakistan after his stopover in Oman. Meeting the Omani Foreign Minister in Muscat, Zarif appreciated Omani position on Yemen and expressed willingness to cooperate in future. Oman has been a concern for Saudi Arabia in recent times due to its refusal to surrender to the Saudi authority in the region and for maintaining a relatively neutral foreign policy. Though as a member of the GCC it shares similar concerns over many issues with its allies, there are still issues where Oman has exerted its independence. Oman's relationship with Iran is just one case in point. Thus, the Iran-Oman stand on Yemen is a setback to the Saudi diplomacy in the region.

Iraq critical of military intervention in Yemen

Besides, Iraq has also taken the same line as Iran and Oman and has criticised Saudi-led military intervention. Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari categorically stated that Iraq

was 'against foreign intervention'.⁴ Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al Abadi asserted that there was 'no logic' in the Saudi-led military intervention and that the 'problem of Yemen is within Yemen'.⁵

Iraq is also witnessing large scale sectarian conflicts which have crippled the country. The huge Iranian influence over Iraq has also shaped the Iraqi perception towards the crisis in Yemen. Saudi Arabia is facing a tough time in Iraq where it gets security threats and challenges from the Islamic State. At the same time the government in Baghdad has been supportive of Iran as Riyadh has lost its influence over Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussain.

Joint Arab military force?

Amidst the growing tension in Yemen, there is call by the countries of the region to form a joint Arab military force to face the security challenges. Such a proposal has been in the air since long but has never been materialized. With the growing threat of the ISIS and presently, the challenges emanating from Yemen, the necessity of such a force has been felt by the Arab League. There are countries such as Syria and Iraq, who are allies of Iran, who are not in favour of establishment of such a joint military force as they believe that it may create further insecurity in the region. Countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia are in the forefront supporting the idea. This issue was discussed in detail in the 26th Arab League summit held in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt on March 29, 2015 and majority of the member states seemed to be in favour of establishing such a joint force. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shokri stated that 'a vision to establish a joint Arab force' would be 'ready within the next four months'.⁶

Egyptian enthusiasm

Egypt has shown extreme keenness in its support to Saudi Arabia. Egyptian President Fattah El Sisi owes a lot to the Saudis. Riyadh was behind the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt. After being elected as the president, Sisi has received

⁴ "Iraq Opposes Saudi-Led Air Strikes in Yemen: FM", *Al Manar*, March 26, 2015, at <http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/adetails.php?eid=203014&frid=23&seccatid=24&cid=23&fromval=1>

⁵ "Tensions Flare Between Iraq and Saudi Arabia in U.S. Coalition", *The New York Times*, April 15, 2015, at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/16/world/middleeast/iraqi-prime-minister-criticizes-saudi-intervention-in-yemen.html?_r=1

⁶ "Egypt FM: Arab League close to forming joint military force", *Asharq Al Awsat*, May 9, 2014, at <http://www.aawsat.net/2015/05/article55343360/egypt-fm-arab-league-close-to-forming-joint-military-force>

huge amount of aid from Saudi Arabia and political support as well. It is therefore obvious for Sisi to support the Saudi interests in the region. Saudi Arabia is happy to have Egypt back on its side as it lost its trusted ally Hosni Mubarak after the protests against him in 2011. The growing Saudi-Egyptian relationship particularly in the security arena is therefore an important development in the regional geopolitics.

Importance of Egypt in the region was highlighted by the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs who stated that he visualizes a Gulf region dominated by Saudi Arabia and the Arab world where Egypt plays an important role.⁷ By supporting the Saudi-led operation, Egypt is trying to make a comeback to mainstream Arab politics with renewed vigor. The rise of Egypt under Sisi and its alliance with Saudi Arabia offers a favorable situation for both.

Renewed GCC pressure on the US

The US-Gulf security relationship has come under scanner as a result of the Saudi operation. There have been demands from the Gulf countries to the US to supply arms and weapons to them in view of the threats emanating throughout the region. The operation will also likely impact the P5+1 talks on Iranian nuclear issue. The US is under pressure from the GCC countries as they believe that their security will be challenged as a result of a nuclear deal with Iran. There is also a concern among the GCC countries that the US may abandon them after signing a deal with Iran that may contribute to a significant increase of Iranian power in the region at the cost of their security. At the US-GCC summit held at Camp David in May 13-14, the GCC leaders sought a renewed American commitment towards the security of the GCC countries. Allaying the GCC concerns, President Obama, on his part, reassured the GCC allies of his commitment to the security of the Gulf region and stated that any deal with Iran will address the concerns of the GCC countries as well.⁸

For the GCC, the US-Iran rapprochement comes at a time of growing activities and rising influence of Iran throughout the region. Though the US has remained the primary security provider for the GCC countries, they want further assurances from the US in view of the growing insecurity in the region. The deteriorating situation in Yemen with the advance of the Houthis has acted as the immediate trigger for putting more pressure on the US over regional security.

⁷ "GCC seeks US political commitment in Iran deal, says UAE's Gargash", *The National*, May 11, 2015, at <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/gcc-seeks-us-political-commitment-in-iran-deal-says-uaes-gargash>

⁸ "U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement", The White House, May 14, 2015, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>

Conclusion

The Saudi-led military operation in Yemen has not been able to bring back Hadi to power nor has it been able to completely drive the Houthis out of the capital. The solution to Yemen's problem lies in dialogue and negotiation between the parties concerned. Saudi Arabia appears to be more concerned about its own national security challenges and losing regional influence in the Gulf than about the stability of Yemen. Iran, on its part wants to capitalise upon the chaos and confusion created by the Saudi operation. While both the regional powers vie for power and influence, Yemenis continue to suffer and the country seems to be slipping in to further instability. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia have brought in their allies and friends into supporting their moves making the situation more complex.

The Saudi-led operation has further exposed the deep political and sectarian polarization in the region. Oman's desire to remain neutral amidst a crisis of this nature, its open defiance of the Saudi authority in the region, Omani sympathy towards Iran, Iranian moves to come closer to Pakistan, continuing Iraqi refusal to come under Saudi pressure, revival of Saudi-Egyptian ties, the GCC's pressure on the US regarding security assurances are some of the trends which will shape the course of regional geopolitics in the foreseeable future.