

Saudi palace intrigues, Yemeni sufferings

By Stig Stenslie

■ Executive summary

By the end of September 2015 Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen had lasted for six months: the Huthi militiamen and their allies in the Yemeni army were still fighting fiercely, and Sanaa was still not recaptured. The war has from its inception carried significant political risk for King Salman and his son, Muhammad bin Salman, who has been portrayed as the mastermind behind Saudi Arabia's strategy in Yemen. Among Saudis one can now notice that the wave of euphoric nationalism that the war initially triggered is being weakened, and criticism of Riyadh's war is brewing, especially in social media. Far more alarming for King Salman and his son, some of the senior princes appear to be mounting a campaign to depose them. Muhammad bin Salman is particularly being criticised for his role in leading the country's troublesome war in Yemen. King Salman and his son cannot accept anything other than Saudi-led success in the war in Yemen. The fact that the war is of existential importance for them is a powerful incentive to use disproportionate force to achieve a complete victory. This is bad news for the already suffering Yemenis. The war may result in Yemen becoming a failed state and thus a haven for terrorist organisations, with serious consequences for the security of Saudi Arabia.

Background

On March 26th 2015 King Salman of Saudi Arabia ordered airstrikes on the Huthis and their allies in Yemen. The operation, dubbed "Decisive Storm", was supported by a coalition of Sunni Muslim countries, including the Gulf Cooperation Council countries (except for Oman), Morocco, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan. The U.S. has provided logistics and intelligence. The military campaign was initiated after Yemeni president 'Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi asked the United Nations (UN) Security Council on March 25th for assistance to stop Huthi militia advancing towards Aden. Saudi Arabia's stated goal was to break the back of the Huthi revolt, which the Saudis claim is backed by Iran, and to reinstate "the legitimate government of Yemen" (i.e. Hadi as Yemen's legitimate president).

When anti-Huthi forces captured Aden in July the war entered a new phase: a ground campaign – known as "Golden Arrow" – led by thousands of heavily armed troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In late September Gulf troops and allied Yemeni tribesmen were engaged in heavy ground battles with the Huthi militiamen

and their allies in Yemen's army in the desert province of Marib, 120 km (75 miles) east of the capital, Sanaa. Hadi had arrived in the southern port city of Aden a week after his government's formal return to Yemeni soil from Saudi Arabia.

The war in Yemen has dragged on longer than the Saudi king probably expected and has turned into a humanitarian disaster. Since March, more than 4,500 Yemenis have died (the majority civilians), more than 19,000 have been injured and about 1.3 million have been forced to flee their homes, according to UN figures. The UN estimates that 80% of the population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, and famines and epidemics are looming. At the same time Yemen's infrastructure, and rich and unique cultural heritage are being destroyed. About 100 Saudi military personnel, including a general, have been killed along the border with Yemen since the Saudi-led campaign began in March, while there are reports of skirmishes inside Saudi Arabia with invading Huthis.

Burnishing Muhammad bin Salman's credentials

Besides Saudi Arabia's stated goal to "protect the legitimate government of Yemen", the military operation is arguably an opportune move by King Salman to burnish the credentials of his favoured son, Prince Muhammad bin Salman, or MbS, as he is known. In the wake of the royal succession in January 2015 MbS was named defence minister and head of the newly established Council of Economic and Development Affairs. On April 29th he was appointed deputy crown prince, making him third in the line of succession.

Within the royal house and among ordinary Saudis many questioned his father's appointment of the young, uneducated and inexperienced prince – who is 29 years old – to these prominent positions. By giving so much power to MbS the king bypassed his brothers and older sons, not to mention the many older and far more experienced nephews.

In the wake of the launch of the military campaign in Yemen government-controlled Saudi media represented the young MbS as the "commander in chief" who was decisively leading the attacks on the "Iranian-backed" Huthi militiamen. The media published numerous photos of him, among others, directing the war from his office, visiting soldiers on the battlefield and sitting in the cockpit of a fighter jet. Even popular songs praised MbS for his leadership and courage.

Moreover, King Salman probably saw the attack on the Yemeni Huthis – whom the Saudis portray as clients of Iran – as an opportune move to rally support among Saudis for himself and his son. This is important, because the royals are facing considerable challenges at home – symptomatic of cultural, socioeconomic and political concerns – and there are few issues that unite the divided Saudi nation. Moreover, the military operation is an attempt to flex Saudi muscles and restore "honour" after the humiliating "defeat" against the Assad regime and Iran in Syria.

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

The fact that the government acted was initially a source of broad public satisfaction in the kingdom. The Saudi press and religious establishment backed the military operation unequivocally. On Twitter – which is a barometer that measures popular currents in Saudi Arabia – nationalistic tweets proliferated supporting the kingdom's military action against the Huthis and their allies in Yemen.

Not according to plan

By the end of September the war had lasted for six months and the stated aims had yet to be achieved: the Huthi militiamen and their allies in the Yemeni army were still fighting fiercely, and Sanaa had not yet been recaptured. The war has from its initiation carried significant political risk for Salman, and not least his son, MbS, who has been portrayed as the mastermind behind Saudi Arabia's strategy in Yemen. The political risk will increase the longer the war drags on.

Despite the superior military capabilities of the Gulf states and their Yemeni allies, it is not a given that the Huthi militia can be defeated. Until recently the fighting on the ground took place in Aden and Yemen's southern provinces, outside the heartlands of the Zaydis that the Huthi movement springs from. Currently, the fighting is taking place in Marib, a province the Saudi-led alliance must control to launch a decisive offensive against Sanaa. In Marib the military advance has been slower than in the south, and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have taken substantial losses. There are reasons to believe that the alliance will face even greater difficulties if an offensive is also launched against Huthi militia north of Sanaa. The Zaydis have throughout history resisted invading Ottomans, Saudis and Egyptians from their stronghold in the mountainous north, which has proved to be difficult and costly to take in terms of casualties.

The longer the war drags on the greater the sufferings of ordinary Yemenis and the Saudi losses. Among the Saudis one can now notice that the wave of euphoric nationalism that the war initially triggered is weakening and criticism of Riyadh's war is brewing, especially in social media. The sight of one of the Arab world's richest countries destroying its poorest neighbour sickens many Saudis. Some popular religious leaders, who originally threw their support behind the military campaign, are fronting the criticism. Amid growing online criticism Saudi authorities are censoring the so-called YouTube imams and are attempting to direct them to voice "patriotic" support for the ongoing military campaign in Yemen – and are threatening to ban dissident clerics from preaching in mosques.

Although the Saudi-directed humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen has received far less international attention than the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, criticisms are increasingly directed towards the kingdom, particularly from the UN and international humanitarian organisations. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has also criticised the indiscriminate destruction of Yemen's irreplaceable historical heritage. Many international voices are now warning against the devastating consequences of initiating a military campaign to drive the Huthi militia and their allies out of Sanaa.

Far more alarming for King Salman and his son, MbS, there appears to be a mounting campaign by some of the senior princes to dethrone the current monarch.

In September a senior member of the royal family, reportedly a grandson of Saudi Arabia's founder, Ibn Sa'ud, circulated two letters to his relatives that expressed fears that the monarchy would collapse if King Salman were not promptly removed from the throne.

Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayif and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman were also strongly criticised. The author of the letter particularly criticised the latter for his role in leading the country's troublesome war in Yemen. MbS – referred to privately by some of his relatives as "the boy" or "the teenager" – was criticised for lacking a proper military strategy or an exit plan, as well as for being overly ambitious, arrogant and reckless. Two of the king's brothers, princes Ahmad and Talal, are said to be among MbS's harshest critics, albeit in private. To save the kingdom the author of the letter advocated that power had to be returned to the older and more experienced princes.

Arguably, King Salman and MbS cannot accept anything other than Saudi-led success in the war in Yemen. The Saudis remember the disastrous military campaign in 2009, which ended only when the royal family paid the Huthis a vast amount of money to withdraw from territory they had seized inside Saudi Arabia. This military failure led to the disgrace of Prince Khalid bin Sultan, who then commanded the Saudi forces. A similar humiliation in the current campaign could lead to a palace coup in Riyadh. The fact that the war is of existential importance for the king and his son is a powerful incentive to use disproportionate force to achieve a complete victory. Meanwhile, it is unlikely that they will yield to pressure at home or international demands for the war to be restricted or terminated. This is bad news for the already suffering Yemenis.

Nightmare of a failed state

Even though King Salman wishes against all odds to win his war, it is unlikely that Saudi Arabia will be able to stabilise and rebuild the devastated and deeply fragmented Yemen. Therefore, over the longer term there is a great danger that the devastating military operation will cause Yemen to become a failed state. This will have substantial negative effects on the security of Saudi Arabia. If Yemen becomes another Somalia, Islamic militants might well use the neighbouring country as a safe haven and a platform for launching armed attacks in the kingdom. There are indications that al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula has strengthened its foothold in Yemen as the Saudis are busy fighting the Huthis. The so-called Islamic State has also gained some ground in war-torn Yemen. Further fragmentation of Yemeni society and the weakening of state authority will also make it easier for hostile states to buy influence in the country. The Iranians – whom the Saudis accuse of supporting the Huthi militiamen – would probably see a strategic advantage in causing trouble for the Saudis in the latter's own backyard by supporting anti-Saudi groups. Moreover, a collapsed Yemen would lead to a surge in refugees crossing the border into Saudi Arabia; increased crime in the kingdom's southern provinces, primarily in the form of smuggling; and perhaps also piracy similar to that off the coast of Somalia.

■ THE AUTHOR

Stig Stenslie is assistant director general and head of the 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* (IB 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