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Contested Spaces: the Saudi responseto Yemen's escalating Crisis

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Saudi Arabia and the Middle East have yet again attracted the globe's attention, as the ongoing crisis in nearby Yemen, which has virtually left it ungoverned and its population in despair, seems to be evolving into an all-our war.

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Two months have passed since King Salman's ascension to the Saudi Arabian throne, and it seems that none of the succession-related fears came to fruition. However, Iran seems to be strengthening its international presence, the Islamic State (IS) is expanding its sphere of actions, and oil prices are yet to be restored to their former levels. All in all, the power transition may have been the least of Saudi Arabia's worries and perhaps the greatest danger that Iran poses to Riyadh can be found to its South.

For the past four years, Yemen has been entangled in an ongoing crisis which has only been scaling up. Since September, its capital, Sana'a, has been under occupation by a Zaydi Shi'a group, known as the Houthis (also Ansar Allah), which has managed to take hold of most of Yemen's western territories and to force the Saudi-backed President Hadi into constant retreat.¹ In essence, this has made the Houthis the closest to a government the country has, and seeing as they are rumored to be financially and morally backed by Tehran, a serious threat lurking just outside Saudi Arabia's backyard.

Composed of rough roads, the Saudi Arabia-Yemen borders are a mountainous and barely defensible region, and with Yemen's rapidly deteriorating conditions (e.g. 40% unemployment or more) they have become a hub for virtually all sorts of illegal activities. Leaving aside the usual gun and drug trafficking, in recent months thousands of immigrants and refugees have been trying to enter the Kingdom in pursuit of a better life. But this constitutes a potential danger for Riyadh's security, for their sheer number can easily conceal those wishing to promote acts of violence. Besides, in the past, this security breach has been exploited by both Al-Qaeda's branch in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and by the Houthis.² Though, it should be noted, that the latter have been mainly preoccupied with consolidating their power in Yemen and with battling other antagonizing groups in the South—most prominently the Hadi loyalists and AQAP. Nonetheless, Riyadh is sure to think that an empowered Houthi regime would sooner or later also turn its attention towards the North.

As a result, the Saudis have consistently tried to address this threat with diverging strategies. They have removed financial backing from an already stagnated Yemen, in order to put pressure on the rebels, who, would, eventually, be in need of more than just brute force to control their territories. And they have hurried to reinforce their border-fence, in order to better-protect their Achilles heel.³ More recently, though, they have begun raising the stakes.

Since the 26th (March 2015), Saudi Arabia has launched a series of air strikes, backed-up by a coalition of Gulf Cooperation forces and Arab states. This has led to many wondering whether a full-scale invasion was imminent, as the Arab Kingdom seems to have grown tired of waiting outside the lines while its neighborhood is in turmoil. Leaving aside its geostrategic importance in the 'war on terror' and the smooth continuation of the Bab el-Mandeb oil sea-route,⁴ a war-torn and divided on sectarian lines Yemen poses an important threat to Saudi sovereignty, as it could present its own oppressed Shi'a population, living in the oil-rich eastern provinces, with an example to follow.

But seeing how the Saudi-led coalition is actually a Sunni one, recent actions may also serve interests further down the line. In essence, they could be presenting Tehran with a strong message: that it is surrounded by forces which do not wish to see it expanding its influence further.⁵ That may also be the case considering Pakistan's involvement. Even if its support remains limited to simple logistics, its contribution to operation 'Decisive Storm' does risk disturbing its measurable Shi'a population. Nonetheless, this wouldn't be the first time Islamabad intervenes in Yemen in aid of its closest ally⁶ and helps better promote the 'message', by showcasing a united Sunni front that stretches as far as Tehran's Southeast walls.

For its part, though, and aside from welcoming another follower to its revolutionary steps, Iran has denied accusations regarding its arming of the Houthis. And these have also been consistently denied by the rebels themselves.⁷ Besides, supporting an active rebellion may not be in Tehran's best interests at this point. It still has to deal with IS in Syria and Iraq—its own 'fence' against the Sunni—and it probably wouldn't want risking upsetting Washington, during such a precarious time in the nuclear negotiations. Though, at the same time, it is undoubtable that a Shi'a-controlled Yemen, no less than by virtue of it

possibly having nowhere else to turn, would provide it with a geostrategically important client-state and great leverage against its rivals.

Now, with the threat of a pending invasion, this could probably remain just another assumption in the long narrative of the Mideast 'cold war'. What is not an assumption however, is the implication of the ongoing air bombings and the imminent ground attack. These will most surely throw the country into further despair and, as has already been the case, cost the lives of countless innocent people, further contributing to the exacerbation of an already out of control humanitarian crisis.⁸ Furthermore, it will probably provide better maneuverability and additional opportunities for IS—and AQAP for that matter—which, since assuming responsibility for the Sana'a mosque bombings, has made clear that it fully intends to gain from the wide-spread chaos and to extend its activities in the region. This would also mean that Riyadh could be facing IS, both in the North as well as the South of its borders.

All of the above, in turn, are indicative of Saudi Arabia's loss of control over one of its traditional areas of influence—an area in which it now finds itself in need of antagonizing multiple rivals for supremacy. Yet, this also comes at a time when its most powerful instrument, its economy, seems to be out of sync.

Since November, Saudi Arabia has been oversupplying the energy market in an effort to regain some of its lost oil share. This policy, which has mainly been pursued as a means of counterbalancing the effects of the growing US shale oil industry and has put more pressure on an already sanctioned Iran, has led to some of the lowest oil prices in recent years. But Iran may be facing a gradual lifting of sanctions, while the US may have welcomed the situation, since low fuel prices do tend to translate into greater consumption and expansion of its industry and market. On the other hand, the Kingdom hasn't managed to remain unscathed by its own policy. Saudi Arabia relies heavily on oil exports, which constitute roughly 90% of its revenues and have provided it with a \$750 billion safety net. Considering a possible continuation of low prices, though, these were expected to last for just another decade and had already resulted in an expected \$38.6 billion deficit for 2015, according to January estimations.⁹

This, in turn, may be indicative of a potential risk for Saudi Arabia in the long-term. It has to spend domestically, in order to keep its population content and in check, and it has to spend externally, in order to preserve its regional clout and regain control of the South. Even following a possible and costly invasion, it shall still need to make arrangements for the country's reconstruction, if it wants to keep Yemen's population in check. Even more so, considering that, as is being acknowledged by even the more categorical analysts,¹⁰ its wartime arrangements involve plans for the 'next day' and are aimed, primarily, at bringing the Houthis back at the negotiating table. And since its greatest leverage is financial support, Riyadh will sooner or later find itself in need of yet again consolidating its influence through 'investment'.

As such, the Saudi Kingdom may find that it cannot keep pursuing multiple and conflicting policies. Specifically, and though its safety cushion does provide it with room for maneuvers, it may find it difficult to simultaneously provide 'bread and games' for its people, oil-price pressure for its rivals and an authoritative display of power for its enemies. All in all, a tough and highly volatile first test for the newly-seated king. Then again, as has been shown by the recent rise in oil prices,¹¹ wars do tend to increase demand on necessity goods.

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