

Saudi royals' fear: Islamic revolutionary blowback from Yemen

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“The Saudis committed a big mistake in Yemen and the impacts of the crimes they have committed will certainly backfire on them.”

—Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei¹

On March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia launched a sanguinary military aggression against its neighbor Yemen in an effort to restore the defunct government of Abdrabbu Mansour Hadi. Vice president for 17 years under former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, Hadi came to power in 2011 under a deal brokered by Saudi royals under U.S. auspices, but resigned in January 2015 after failing to fulfill a power-sharing agreement signed with the Houthis in September 2014.² As a result, Hadi was forced to look to his U.S.-backed benefactors to regain his office, but history suggests Saudi efforts not only will fail but also will backfire.

On the surface, the conflict in Yemen appears to be a classic case of reestablishing the reign of a U.S.-backed dictator by the use of a proxy force, in this case, Saudi Arabia. However, a closer look reveals that the Saudi royals have undertaken this mission out of fear that unrest expanding outside its borders has the potential to infiltrate and destabilize the Wahhabi-aligned monarchy. If the Saudi campaign fails to achieve the goal of restoring Hadi to his presidential position, not only would it be a great embarrassment to the new monarch Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud and a major foreign policy defeat,³ but it also could embolden opposition forces within the kingdom.

And one need look no further than Bahrain and the brutal suppression of the popular protests carried out by Saudi military forces to comprehend the intensity of this collective fear among the Saudi rulers of revolutionary blowback.⁴ As a result of these fears of an uprising within Saudi Arabia, Riyadh's royals have ruthlessly crushed Shi'a uprisings with ferocity in Bahrain and Yemen as well as within the borders of the kingdom itself. This widespread suppression of dissent has included the imprisonment of Shi'a ulema such as Sheikh Nimr an-Nimr, who has been sentenced to death for his alleged role in demonstrations against the Riyadh regime.⁵

While Saudi rulers have historically looked upon Shi'a Islam as a “deviant” sect, Shi'is themselves were not seen as particularly threatening until the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Beginning in November of 1979, Shi'is in the Eastern Province took to the streets en masse to demonstrate against the Saudi regime. Since that time, all stops have been pulled out on the vituperative anti-Shi'a rhetoric as well as the vicious repression of Shi'is not only within Saudi Arabia but also in neighboring Bahrain and now in Yemen.

For the U.S., Saudi Arabia is a close regional ally and therefore it is backing Riyadh's aggressive foray against Yemen. One possible rationalization for Washington's support is quelling fears over the alleged involvement of Iran with the Houthis; more likely is ensuring the security of the Bab al-Mandeb strait at the mouth of the Red Sea, one of six main transit chokepoints for worldwide crude oil shipping.⁶ Since any disruption in the crude oil supply chain would have global economic repercussions, the U.S. can be expected to back the Saudis, regardless of the atrocities they may commit. Similarly, with the 5th U.S. Naval fleet based in Manama, Bahrain,

the U.S. has been predictably silent on the brutal Saudi suppression of Shi'a demonstrations there. Hence, U.S. interests seem to be in lockstep with Saudi interests, at least for the near term.

Moreover, the ruling elite in the U.S. seem inclined to the Saudi royals' misguided view that containment of Iran is vital to the security of the Persian Gulf region. However, the rise of ISIL has changed the calculus and now some in the U.S. administration apparently have realized that Iran could be an essential partner in the war against the takfiri militants.⁷ Nevertheless, a recent U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee hearing chaired by ultra-right winger John McCain heard testimony from "experts" who insisted that Iran still poses a greater threat than ISIL, at least as far as Iraq is concerned.⁸ And, of course, the perception in the west is that all Shi'is have a connection with Iran.⁹

Saudi Arabia was founded on a partnership between Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud, and the anti-Shi'a rhetoric not only persists to this day, but has increased in intensity since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Except for a brief period around 2003 during which some cosmetic gestures of reconciliation were instituted by Riyadh,¹⁰ senior Saudi clerics have continuously vilified Shi'a Islam and the monarchy has done nothing to counter or silence them.¹¹ The problem is that while the Shi'a only represent 10 to 15 percent of the Saudi population, they are an 80-percent majority in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region,¹² which includes Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and the cities of Qatif and al-Ahsa. There are also other Shi'a in Najran Province close to the Yemen border.¹³ So without serious reform in the kingdom, opposition pressure for Shi'a rights will only build like steam in a pressure cooker.

A quick look at the history of Yemen should help clarify the futility of the current Saudi aggression. The Houthi movement consists of so-called Zaydi (or "Fiver") Shi'a Muslims who split from the majority "Twelver" Shi'a Muslims that recognized Muhammad ibn Ali ibn al-Husayn (AS) as the fifth Imam. Instead, they followed Zayd ibn Ali who in 740 led an unsuccessful rebellion against the Umayyad caliphate. Despite the defeat, adherents managed to establish an enduring Zaydi imamate in Yemen that lasted until September 1962 when a coup instigated by modernist army officers affiliated with Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser forced the last Zaydi imam, Muhammad al-Badr al-Mansur, into exile and precipitated a civil war lasting from 1962 to 1970.¹⁴

The ensuing civil war in Yemen drew in massive armed forces from Egypt and mercenaries from Saudi Arabia who found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict, the Egyptian troops backing the modernists of the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the Saudis backing the Zaydis, who refused to accept the legitimacy of the Nasser-aligned, republican government. Nasser finally pulled his troops out of Yemen in June of 1967, leading to the creation of the Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), which later fell under Marxist control in 1969. North Yemen managed to establish a coalition government in 1974,¹⁵ but it was not until after the civil war of 1986 that Yemen was finally united in 1990 under former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Even then, another civil war in 1994 was instigated by Sunni southern factions attempting to reestablish an independent South Yemen.¹⁶

Today, Egyptian military historians refer to Nasser's armed escapade in Yemen as Egypt's Vietnam, reflecting the failure of the Egyptian forces totaling 55,000 to subdue the Zaydi

rebels.¹⁷ Why Saudi king Salman bin Abdulaziz would think Saudi forces using tactics similar to those used by the Egyptians against the Zaydis would be successful in subduing the Houthis now is difficult to understand, since history teaches that such a war plan is doomed to failure.

What led the Saudis to initiate this latest aggression appears to have been the imminent agreement by the Houthis and the other dozen Yemeni parties involved in the negotiations on power-sharing, which would have retained a role for Hadi. According to Jamal Benomar, the former United Nations mediator in Yemen, "When this [Saudi] campaign started, one thing that was significant but went unnoticed is that the Yemenis were close to a deal that would institute a power-sharing with the Houthis."

Publicly, the Saudis gave three reasons for their campaign that has slain over 1,500 people: first, restoring Hadi as president; second, crushing the Houthi movement; and third, curbing Iran's influence in Yemen.¹⁸ In regards to Saudi allegations of Iranian influence, even the U.S. State Department through spokesperson Marie Harf denied this. "We know there's a relationship with the Houthis, certainly, although, not to our knowledge, an operational sort of control relationship," she said in a recent press briefing.¹⁹

Crushing the determined and well-armed Houthi movement did not happen in 2005 and seems even less likely to happen now. Furthermore, the Houthis had been willing to accept a 20 percent role in the government, so even if they were completely eliminated, there is the other 80 percent of Yemeni opposition forces remaining. Finally, by pursuing their fruitless military interference on the Yemeni people's right of self-determination, the Saudis risk escalating internal opposition to their already fragile monarchy.²⁰

The Saudi bombing war in Yemen also has unintentionally strengthened al-Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which has gained ground in Yemen since the assault began. By targeting the Houthi fighters exclusively, the Saudis have inadvertently allowed their AQAP adversary, which is financed by private Saudi funding, to increase in strength.²¹ Even right-leaning Brookings Institute scholar Kenneth Pollack has warned that "greater Saudi intervention in Yemen is unlikely to improve the situation and could easily undermine the Kingdom's own security and stability over the medium to longer term."²² In short, Saudi Arabia's "Operation Decisive Storm" is not only proving to be indecisive, but also is backfiring on its perpetrator.

So despite the public facade, the one and only reason for the Saudi aggression against the Houthis in Yemen is to prevent a popular uprising from spilling over into the kingdom and gathering momentum.²³ However, by continuing their relentless assault on Yemen, the Saudis are assuring that their campaign will indeed backfire by inspiring opposition forces within the kingdom to close ranks and exercise their right of self-determination.

Endnotes

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