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## Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Into the Abyss

by MICHAEL HORTON

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Not long before the founder of Saudi Arabia, King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud, died in 1953, he is purported to have said, “the good or evil for us will come from Yemen.” With the commencement of air strikes on targets in Yemen, it is increasingly likely that the latter part of his prediction will come true. Nothing good—and certainly nothing decisive—will come from the Saudi led “Operation Decisive Storm.”

The Saudi intervention in Yemen—along with the Kingdom’s 2011 intervention in Bahrain—mark a significant departure from a foreign policy that has been historically characterized by caution, reluctance, and a reliance on proxies. In Bahrain, the Saudi effort to quell the Shi’a led rebellion was successful. However, Yemen could not be more different than Bahrain, which is a tiny nation with flat terrain and an unarmed population. In contrast, Yemen has one of the most heavily armed populations on the planet, terrain that is a guerrilla fighter’s dream, and a two thousand year history of resisting and repelling invaders.

In late 2009, Saudi Arabia launched a quiet but well-resourced campaign against the Houthis, who belong to the Zaidi sect of Shi’a Islam. At the time, the Houthis were locked in their sixth—and what proved to be final—war with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s government. In response to an attack launched by Houthi fighters on Saudi border guards, the Saudi government began operations against the Houthis. The Saudis deployed elements of their

army, special forces, and air force. The campaign proved to be a disaster for the Saudis and resulted in a top level review of their army's battle readiness. The Houthis, who were at that time poorly equipped and facing off against both Yemeni forces and Saudi forces, managed to capture at least one soldier from the elite Saudi Special Forces as well as specialized equipment. Over the course of 2009 and 2010, the Houthis fought both Yemeni and Saudi forces to a standstill.

Following 2010 and in the wake of the 2011 revolution that led to the resignation of President Saleh and the installation of his former vice president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi, as president, the Houthis consolidated their hold on a large swath of northwestern Yemen. The Houthis expanded the territory under their control by building alliances with influential tribes and clans and by merit of being a relatively well-disciplined and capable fighting force. However, the installation of the ineffectual President Hadi helped enable the Houthis' rapid expansion.

Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi was chosen by Yemen's Machiavellian former president as his vice president for a reason: Hadi has no real power base in Yemen and thus could never pose a threat to Saleh or his family. Hadi is from south Yemen, which was an independent nation and wants to be one again. Many southerners still regard Hadi, who sided with Saleh and the north against the south in the 1994 civil war, as a traitor. At the same time, as a southerner, Hadi has little or no influence among Yemen's powerful northern based tribes. Hadi was a brilliant choice for vice president by a man who intended to pass the presidency onto his son.

Now, the Saudi government, along with its GCC partners, Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, and Jordan, has ostensibly launched 'Operation Decisive Storm' to reinstall Hadi who has fled Yemen for Saudi Arabia. The less than clearly articulated goal of the military campaign in Yemen is to reinstall the Hadi led government and to force the Houthis' to lay down their arms and negotiate. It is unlikely that these goals will be achieved. Rather than eroding support for the Houthis, the Saudis and their partners' actions in Yemen, may bolster short term support for the Houthis and former president Saleh who is now nominally allied with the Houthis. Most Yemenis are none too fond of the House of Saud and there are many Yemenis still alive who remember the Egyptians' bloody and disastrous 1962-67 invasion of north Yemen which claimed the lives of twenty thousand Egyptian soldiers and thousands of Yemeni fighters and civilians.

"Operation Decisive Storm" will ensure that Yemen is pushed further along the path to all out civil war, that radical Islamist organizations like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and now the Islamic State (sworn enemies of the Houthis and all Shi'a Muslims) flourish, and that a humanitarian crisis ensues. More than half of Yemen's children suffer from malnourishment, and, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 61% of Yemen's population of 24 million are in need of humanitarian assistance. With the commencement of "Operation Decisive Storm" food prices, which were already rising due to a plummeting Yemeni riyal, are soaring as Yemenis—those few who can afford to do so—prepare for what could be months of war. The only thing increasing in price faster than food is ammunition and weaponry. Most Yemeni families in the north possess at a minimum an Ak-47 with many families and clans maintaining stores of weapons that include RPGs and grenades.

If the Saudis and their partners, especially the Egyptians, take the next step and begin a ground invasion, their forces will likely face withering resistance from both the Houthis and the new allies that they are sure to attract as a result of the invasion. In the mountain redoubts of northwest Yemen, songs and poems about how the Yemenis made the Turks, who twice invaded Yemen and failed to subdue it, bathe in their own blood are still sung and recited by the descendants of the men who fought off the Turks and then the Egyptians. The Saudi Army is ill prepared for anything beyond the most limited action in Yemen. Its Egyptian partners are similarly ill prepared and are currently struggling to contain a growing insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula.

A ground invasion will tie up thousands of Saudi soldiers for what could be months or even years when the Kingdom must also worry about the threat of the Islamic State on its northern borders. It is also worth remembering that the Saudi Army employs a large contingent of soldiers who are ethnically Yemeni. It is an open question as to how these men may or may not respond when ordered to kill fellow Yemenis. At the same time that they are dealing with what will undoubtedly be a protracted and bloody war, the Saudi government will be forced to manage what could be tens of thousands of refugees pouring across its southern border from Yemen.

Military action in Yemen could well lead the House of Saud into the abyss that King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud may have had in mind before he made his prophetic warning.