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Saudi Arabia and Iran Vie for Regional Supremacy Proxy War in Yemen

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A Saudi Arabia-led coalition continues to bombard Yemen in an effort to stop the advance of an Iran-backed Shiite militia there. The conflict is becoming a proxy war for regional supremacy. The risks to the House of Saud are great.

On recent evenings, even as Western foreign ministers negotiated fervently with the Iranian leadership in Lausanne, Switzerland, two young women in the Yemeni capital of Saana spent their time gazing fearfully into the darkening night sky. Nina Aqlan, a well-known civil rights activist, and her friend Ranim were on the lookout for Saudi Arabian fighter jets. Ranim was staying with Aqlan because her own apartment stands next to the headquarters of the Political Security Organization, Yemen's domestic intelligence agency. The building is considered a potential target for the Saudis and their allies.

"In the beginning, we thought they might bomb us for one or two nights. But it keeps getting worse!" says Ranim. In the background, the thump of the anti-aircraft batteries can be heard, occasionally interrupted by the thundering explosions of bomb detonations. Sometimes, the attacks last from early evening to midnight, they say over a Skype connection that repeatedly crashes. At other times, the bombing begins later and only ends at dawn.

The nightly strikes come as a Saudi Arabia-led, largely Sunni coalition consisting of nine countries seeks to push back Iranian-backed Shiite rebels in Yemen. Coalition jets have struck military bases and intelligence agency headquarters, but also a cement factory, a dairy and a refugee camp. By Thursday, the death toll from the bombings, which began one week ago, had risen to over 90. "What kind of war is this?" Aqlan asks angrily. "Why is it being fought?"

There isn't a direct connection between the hostilities and the surprisingly comprehensive deal reached between the West and Iran on the country's nuclear program on Thursday night. But aside from Israel, no country views the pact with as much skepticism as Saudi Arabia. Indeed, following similar developments in Syria and Iraq, the conflict in Yemen is increasingly looking like a proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran. The two capitals are blatantly wrestling over supremacy in the region, and only one country can emerge on top. Either Saudi Arabia, the traditional Western ally that is watching nervously as the United States slowly pulls back. Or Iran, which has been expanding its power in the region of late and which has just taken an historic step toward rapprochement with the US and its allies.

Thursday night saw Iran take another step forward. The Saudi monarchy, whose power is based on the country's vast oil reserves, were forced to watch from the sidelines in recent weeks as its historic ally America passionately pushed for a solution to the nuclear conflict with Iran. The deal was announced late on Thursday by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini -- and means that Iran has now moved a bit closer to the West and, first and foremost, to the US.

Aiming at Its Ideological Rival

The Saudi military coalition began its intervention in Yemen in the name of security. But after just a week, it has become clear that the top priority of the alliance is not that of creating a balance of power between the two adversarial camps in the Yemen conflict -- which pits Shiite Houthi rebels, who have joined together with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh (who was ousted in a 2011 "Arab Spring" uprising), against Saudi-backed government troops. Indeed, the conflict is more of a complicated domestic struggle than a purely sectarian fight. Still, the Saudi monarchy's intervention is primarily aimed at its ideological rival: Iran.

At the same time, the military operation is a chance for Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to demonstrate his independence from the US -- as well as to perhaps prove his country's military leadership in the region as a complement to its longstanding economic strength.

What is clear, however, is that the brewing Sunni-Shiite struggle in the Middle East is extremely dangerous. And the most recent escalation has the potential for not just destroying Yemen, but also for turning into a disaster for Saudi Arabia.

It was only last fall that Riyadh badly miscalculated in Yemen by cutting off financial aid to Hadi, who has since fled his country for the Saudi capital. The Saudi monarchy believed that Hadi, a Sunni, was being far too lenient with the Shiite Houthis, which make up a third of the population of Yemen. But Hadi had only been striving for political survival between the various fronts -- a task made all the more difficult by the return of his Shiite predecessor Saleh, who was

trying to regain power at the forefront of his own militia. Without support from Riyadh, Hadi didn't have a chance.

Even if the Iranians are confessional brothers to the Houthis and have allegedly supplied them with weapons, it is ex-president Saleh who has been the primary reason for their triumphant march through the country. It is an ironic development, given that Saleh, while in power, waged a campaign of his own against Houthi insurgents. Now, however, he has placed his own elite troops -- which he once equipped with the help of hundreds of millions of dollars from the US -- at their disposal. The troops are akin to a private army, and Saleh has a fortune of billions he can use to finance them.

One of Saleh's Dances

Saleh once compared governing in Yemen to "dancing on the heads of snakes." What is now taking place is "one of Saleh's dances," says Abdulkader Alguneid, a leader of recent protests against the Houthis in the economically important city of Taiz, located in the highlands between Sanaa and Aden. "It wasn't foreign powers from outside who took over Taiz," he says. "It was Saleh's followers, soldiers who had defected." Nevertheless, the city is now under Houthi control and it has become the jumping off point for the Shiite militia's forays to the south.

Taiz, too, has become a target for the Saudi coalition's air strikes. "They aren't just killing Houthis," says parliamentarian Abdulkader Mughales, cursing the Saudis. "One-hundred years ago they already took three provinces away from us and still today they are afraid of a strong Yemen." So far, he says, there are no Iranian fighters in the country. "But if the Saudis keep on like this, the Iranians will come and turn our homeland into a battlefield in their war."

The military operation in Yemen is a significant departure from Saudi Arabia's foreign policy tradition. Riyadh has always relied on three strategies to pursue its interests abroad. First, it used its wealth to support allied governments or groups. Second, it established a global network of clerics and Koran schools to spread the puritanical interpretation of the Koran known as Wahhabism. And third, it practiced classic diplomacy and mediation, such as leading the peace talks that ended the 15-year civil war in Lebanon in the late 1980s.

Indeed, even experts on Saudi Arabia have never quite understood why the monarchy has spent decades -- and billions -- arming itself. But the operation in Yemen has now provided the international community with an answer to that question. It is to defend itself from instability in Yemen, a country fractured along confessional and tribal lines.

Cross-border clans in addition to a small army of migrant workers have long bound Saudi Arabia tightly with its southern neighbor. The bin Laden family, one of the most influential in Saudi Arabia, is originally from Yemen as are the mothers of some Saudi princes. For King Salman, it is a nightmare that Iran -- Saudi Arabia's long-time rival for dominance in the region -- is now instigating its confessional brothers in Yemen and seeking to bring the country into its Shiite sphere of influence.

The Coming Generational Shift

Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran stretches back to the time of the Shah. But Iran's growing influence in the region is not the only explanation for Riyadh's foreign policy departure. King Salman has only been in power since January, but he is old and infirm. His sons and nephews are now seeking to use the conflict in Yemen to position themselves for the coming generational shift in the House of Saud. The ruling family has been further unsettled by the apparent reorientation of its once-reliable protective power, the US.

After several tense days and nights, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif and his American counterpart John Kerry -- together with the foreign ministers of Russia, China, France, Great Britain and Germany -- finally reached a framework agreement on Thursday. If finalized, the deal will restrict the amount of uranium that can be enriched at Natanz as well as reducing the degree to which uranium may be purified there. Furthermore, the underground facility at Fordow near Qom may now only be used for research purposes. The heavy-water reactor at Arak, meanwhile, may continue operation, but only in close cooperation with the West.

In response to Western demands for oversight, Iran has furthermore agreed to sign and ratify the additional protocol of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, meaning that inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will be granted more inspection rights. The Vienna-based IAEA has for years been demanding more information from Iran regarding the "potential military dimension" of its nuclear program.

In return, the West has agreed to a step-by-step rollback of economic sanctions, provided that Iran fulfills its end of the bargain. The details, which still harbor plenty of room for conflict and dissent, are to be hammered out by June 30.

As such, Lausanne may not have hosted a historic handshake between Kerry and Zarif, but the deal was surprisingly concrete. Indeed, after the self-imposed Wednesday night deadline for an agreement passed, it looked for a time as though Iran wasn't even prepared to issue a declaration of intent -- which would have driven US President Barack Obama into a corner.

But on Thursday, Obama stepped in front of reporters in the Rose Garden at the White House to speak of a "good deal" and an "historic" agreement. He also warned Congress against blocking it. The framework agreement with Iran is a success for Obama, on whom pressure had been mounting following a year of talks. Criticism from Republicans and from within his own party had been mounting as were demands for significant concessions from Tehran. In Iran, meanwhile, the populace has high hopes that a deal might free them of painful sanctions and lead to an economic turnaround. Iranian President Hassan Rohani even went so far as to speculate about the possible reopening of the US Embassy in Tehran.

Negotiating at Eye Level

For hardliners from the nationalist-religious wing, such a vision is akin to treason against the revolution, even if a substantial majority of Iranians see America as the land of endless opportunity and yearn for rapprochement. But it isn't the cleric Rohani who has the final say in

his country's nuclear policy. Important issues -- such as those dealing with war, peace and relations with the US -- are decided by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei alone. And for the 75-year-old Khamenei, signing a far-reaching nuclear deal by the end of June would represent an unbelievable reversal. It would mark a retreat from a confrontation that provides him, as leader of the revolution, with his legitimacy.

Still, after a quarter-century in power, Khamenei has a more confident grip on power in Iran than he has in a long time. Domestically, he has managed to defeat all adversaries. And he has perhaps even, it is said in Tehran, defeated testicular or prostate cancer.

The Western viewpoint holds that the sanctions have strangled the Iranian economy, thus forcing the Tehran leadership to the negotiating table. But Iran sees things differently. There, Khamenei is viewed as a leader who has elevated Iran to a potential nuclear power against the will of the West and is now negotiating with the USA as an equal.

Khamenei has certainly fulfilled his mandate: that of expanding and exporting the revolution. In southern Lebanon, the Iran-armed militia Hezbollah represents a direct threat to Israel. In Syria, Shiite militias ensure the survival of the Iran-allied dictatorship of Bashar Assad. In Iraq, armed groups under Iranian leadership are engaged in battle against the Islamic State. And now, with the advance of the presumably Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, Shiite influence stretches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Aden.

Risks to the House of Saud

Khamenei's adversaries on the Arabian Peninsula, by contrast, have been forced to reposition themselves following the death of King Abdullah in February. Thus far, it has been King Salman's favorite son Mohammed who seems to have positioned himself as the frontrunner to succeed Saudi Arabia's aging monarch. Just 35-years-old, it was Mohammed, Saudi's foreign minister, who received Yemen's exiled President Hadi in Riyadh at the end of March. Two days earlier, he had been sitting next to his cousin, Interior Minister Mohammed bin Naif, 55, at the meeting of the newly created National Security Council during which the Yemen attacks were decided. It remains, unclear, however, which of the young princes might benefit most from the Yemen offensive. Neither seems to harbor any doubts that it is the correct step.

Still, the risks this war poses to the House of Saud are great. Thus far, the air raids have accelerated rather than slowed the advance of the Houthi militias. On Tuesday, the rebels even managed to take a military base directly on the Bab-el-Mandeb, the strait between Yemen and the Horn of Africa that is considered to be among the most strategically important waterways in the world.

The Saudis have dubbed their offensive "Operation Storm of Resolve." But they won't be able to win with air strikes alone; to avoid defeat, they must be prepared to fight on the ground as well. The country's army is hardly in a position to do so, but eyewitnesses have nonetheless reported seeing kilometer-long tank columns along the Saudi border while on the other side thousands of Houthi rebels prepare to do battle with the invaders.

Once before, back in the 1960s, a large regional power sent tens of thousands of soldiers into Yemen. But the operation ended in disaster. It is remembered by history as Egypt's Vietnam.