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When Arab Power Meets Smart Power

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The great Oracle of American foreign policy Henry Kissinger's counsel to policy makers are already proving prescient when he warned of the national security dangers posed by invigorated Iranian hegemonic aspirations in the Middle East and the catastrophic pitfalls of not reassuring traditional Arab allies that a nuclear deal with Iran will not come at the expense of mortgaging the Arab world to a Pax Persica. Iran and its proxy forces have raised the stakes and the cold war between Tehran Pact and America's Arab Allies threatens to go hot as Iran and Saudi Arabia and the UAE trade barbs over the newly launched Operation Decisive Storm strikes in Yemen.

Much like the air corridor that Iran has established over Iraqi airspace into its other client state in Damascus, Iranian air shipments continue into Yemen to aid a guerrilla force that emulates Iranian Revolutionary Guards-Qods Force and Lebanese Hizballah tandem model of asymmetric warfare and co-option of state institutions.

Iran's threat to the Arab Allied coalition, led by the Saudi Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates cannot be disassociated from the threat posed to U.S. interests, both direct and indirect. Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Lebanese Hizballah -- whose international operation arm is an extension of the Qods Force 7th Corps -- publicly threatened retaliation for the Operation Decisive Storm campaign against Iranian backed Houthi militants.

Nasrallah declared the operation "Saudi-American aggression", an ominous warning given that the Obama Administration, to its credit, has very clearly indicated that the Department of Defense's Central Command is playing an important role in aiding the Arab coalition in its targeting, intelligence, and other command and control functions in the ongoing campaign.

Indeed, the coordination amongst the Arab states, U.S. enablers, and local tribesmen is unprecedented in that it represents the first truly Arab-led sustained combined air-ground campaign in modern history. Operation Decisive Storm has demonstrated that the arena of smart power and force projection no longer exclusively belongs to Western military powers.

This emergence of a modern and coordinated Arab Alliance to counter Iran's "resistance axis" is in America's interests. For those who argue that Iran as a de facto security guarantor for the region would not be inimical to American interests, now retired General James Mattis of U.S. Central Command warned only four years ago that Iran "continues to equip militants... that attack U.S. and coalition forces."

And so, the prospects of even greater confrontation looms as Iran continues to deploy its elite external special operations forces and military aid to every corner of the Arab world. In case Iran's ultimate intentions for the regions were unclear, Nasrallah stressed in his speech that the war would transform Yemen into a "state qualified for being alongside the resistance movements in the region" -- a not so subtle hint that while Washington may yet to grasp the strategic linkage between Iran's unconventional forces and its regional ambitions, Iran's Shia militant proxies certainly do.

In response, America's Sunni Arab allies have signaled that the war in Yemen is one front in a much broader campaign. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal has soberly counseled against the rose colored view that a nuclear grand bargain will temper Iran's imperial ambitions. He warned that: "We are, of course, worried about atomic energy and atomic bomb. But we're equally concerned about the nature of action and hegemonic tendencies that Iran has in the region."

And the potential for further escalation is real as Arab tribesmen claim the capture of Iranian advisers in the Yemeni city of Aden and as Free Syrian Army units, some armed with U.S. manufactured T.O.W anti tank guided missiles, and supported by Arab states battle Iranian advisors and Hizballah fighters along the Golan Heights and the Jordanian border.

This is partly why Kissinger sagely advocated the need for robust American "political linkage" of any nuclear deal to restrain the long march of Iran and its proxy forces that has now made Tehran and its clients the "pre-eminent military or political element in multiple Arab countries...[occupying] positions along all of the Middle East's strategic waterways"

Unfettered by sanctions, Iran's asymmetric designs would be vastly boosted and accelerate an already aggressive campaign by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards-Qods Force to subvert, co-opt, and transform Arab states from Iraq to Yemen to Syria into staging grounds and eventual launching pads for Iranian terrorist operations. Such an outcome would gravely distract from the

U.S. led Coalition's fight against ISIS and al Qaeda, of which Sunni Arab state support and those of local Sunni tribes will prove crucial.

And contrary to conventional wisdom, Iran does in fact stand to gain from the "controlled chaos" of ISIS and al Qaeda expansion that then allows the Iranians to cast their security and political umbrella deeper into the region citing Sunni extremism -- which both Tehran and Damascus once shrewdly gave safe haven -- as pretext. According to an astute analysis by the Middle East Forum, Iran's fight against Sunni extremists may "represent a short-term advantage, but it is a long-term threat. The Iranian proxy militias, quite naturally, also embrace Iran's ideology, which is intensely anti-American, anti-Western, and indeed, anti-Semitic."

Washington has been thus far reluctant to explicitly pursue a dual-track approach on the nuclear file while simultaneously bolstering a broader campaign to counter Iran's proxies partly because of fears that Iran would retaliate through its Iraqi Shia proxies against the steadily increasing American military and diplomatic footprint in Iraq.

But such fears may be overblown as demonstrated by the January 18 Israeli airstrike that took out senior Qods Force and Hizballah commanders in Syria. Analysts have posited that Iran's proxies in that instance have calculated that they cannot afford an expanded confrontation given their investment of resources and personnel in Syria and Iraq. To use a poker analogy, American policymakers would do well to note that just because Iran has its proverbial chips all in, doesn't mean it carries in its hands a royal flush.

The Arab coalition force was once dismissed as " more facade than a force" by military analysts. But there can be no doubt that the Iranians are sufficiently concerned that next generation Saudi and UAE aircraft, advanced stand-off missile capability, and complex intel and targeting sharing systems being deployed could eventually pose a threat to not just Iran's proxies but to the Islamic Republic itself.

Iran has always underestimated its regional Arab rivals. Khamanie's recent boorish dismissal of Saudi as an "underdeveloped state" may mask real Iranian worry that Operation Decisive Storm will give birth to a new Arab Smart Power that could rival Iran's strategic edge.

The combination of the UAE's unrivaled grasp of Command, Control, Computing, and Communications (C4); the Saudi Kingdom's enhanced desire towards comprehensive integration of military capabilities; and the broad local Arab support, from Yemeni and Iraqi tribesmen to Syrian rebels, for this campaign offers something that the Iranians have never been confronted before: a capable and unified Arab front.

Indeed, the rapid neutralization of the Houthi point air defense systems and the effective utilization of newly procured U.S. weapons systems over a prolonged period of time, offers a compelling test run for how such capabilities could theoretically be employed to disable another one of Iran's client state's -- Syria -- integrated air defense network and establish air dominance while aligned Sunni Arab tribal forces and rebels push back Iran's proxies on the ground.

Such a scenario may seem far fetched, but President Obama himself in a *NYT* interview rhetorically asked, "Why is it that we can't have Arabs fighting... against what Assad has done?"

It is a question that Iran would not like to see answered. Because while Iran has always had a distinct advantage over regional Arab powers in its ability to power project far beyond its borders using highly sophisticated networks using relatively unsophisticated weaponry, this time it seems the Arabs may just be catching up.