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Iran and Saudi Arabia drawn to Yemen

By Olivier Guitta
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A new front on the war against radical Islam is on fire. While one immediately thinks of Afghanistan or Iraq, the flashpoint now is Yemen, which has become a haven for al-Qaeda fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq and has also come under attack from Iran-backed Houthi rebels. A new element of this equation is the entry of Saudi Arabia, pitting it against Iran.

The conflict between the central government of Yemen and the Zaidite - a Shi'ite sect - Houthi rebels has been going on intermittently since 2004. Since August, the intensity of the fighting has risen as a result of regional players becoming involved behind the scenes.

While Yemen is supported by Saudi Arabia, the Houthis are backed by Iran, which has been more aggressive in the past few months in supporting and financing its allies. It has also mounted a campaign to convert people to Shi'ism, targeting several tribes, especially in the Hadramuth region.

Yemen recently seized an Iranian ship transporting weapons to the Houthi rebels. The Saudi daily, al-Watan, has reported that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps is training Houthi elements. The Saudi-owned al-Arabiya newspaper also reported that a dozen Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon were killed during battles in October. On October 16, the Kuwaiti al-Seyassah added that three Hezbollah experts in explosives had also been killed and 19 more were taken prisoner by the Yemeni army.

Houthi rebels recently accused Saudi Arabia of intercepting ships carrying weapons destined for the rebellion and also of hosting the Yemeni army at a Saudi base in the Jebel Dukhan area. Riyadh estimates that the Houthi forces number between 4,000 and 5,000, including Iranians and Hezbollah elements.

On November 3, matters escalated violently and Saudi Arabia was left no choice but to enter

the conflict. On that day, Houthi rebels entered Saudi territory, killing one border guard and injuring 11, and took control of some Saudi territory. That was a red line that pushed the Saudi army into responding.

Saudi F15s and Tornado fighter jets went into action, bombarding Houthi positions at the Saudi-Yemeni border for a few days. Saudi Arabia also massed troops at the border with Yemen and dozens of border Saudi villages were evacuated and declared military zones.

Riyadh later regained control of the area, Prince Khaled bin Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz, the assistant minister for defense and aviation, said at the weekend, according to the Saudi Press Agency.

While some Saudi officials say they do not intend to enter Yemeni territory, an adviser to the Saudi government told al-Watan that this latest operation was not just a one-time shot but would be much longer and may include a ground incursion to clean up the rebels' camps.

According to the French Liberation, a column of tanks and motored infantry did enter Yemeni territory to target rebel positions. Even after this heavy fighting, Houthi rebels have succeeded in killing at least five Saudi soldiers and allegedly have taken four more prisoners.

Saudi Arabia blames Iran for this proxy war, with a Saudi official accusing the insurgents of working for Tehran and wanting to take their front to the Saudi border.

At the same time, Yemen is also fighting al-Qaeda in the east, in the province of Hadramuth. Al-Qaeda has mounted daring operations, such as a brazen attack on a convoy of high-ranking security officials that resulted in the death of three of them on November 3. Several media reports evoke the probability of complicity with al-Qaeda among members of the Yemeni army.

Yemen is under multiple assaults and the next few weeks are going to be crucial if Iran and Saudi Arabia are to avoid being dragged further into this conflict.

A tiff over the upcoming *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Mecca in Saudi Arabia does not help matters. Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad said Tehran would take "appropriate measures" if Iranian pilgrims faced any restrictions during the pilgrimage. This follows a warning from Saudi Arabia that pilgrims must not stage protests at the *hajj*; Iran believes the event has spiritual as well as political dimensions.