

Desert Stretch: Saudi Arabia's Ambitious Military Operations

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Brief Analysis

Riyadh's offer to deploy ground troops in Syria and reestablish air operations comes while its forces are still heavily committed in Yemen and a huge military exercise begins in the kingdom's north.

On February 9, Saudi deputy crown prince and defense minister Muhammad bin Salman visited military units in the southwestern province of Jizan, along the border with Yemen, posing with special forces soldiers and visiting injured troops in a field hospital. On February 11, wearing his trademark black *thawb* and red-and-white-checked headdress, MbS, as he is known, was at NATO headquarters in Brussels for a meeting of the international coalition to counter the Islamic State (IS). The next day, Saudi Brig. Gen. Ahmed Asiri, the military advisor to MbS, said the kingdom had made an "irreversible decision" to send ground troops to fight IS in Syria. Saudi media also revealed plans for an imminent major military exercise "in the northern region," described as "a clear message to Iran and the countries in the region that [Iran] supports that any hostile intentions and actions will be firmly dealt with."

Assessing Saudi Priorities

While one possible interpretation of the news reports would suggest increasing Saudi military self-confidence and capabilities, the statements convey some confusion about the kingdom's priorities. What's more important? The Houthi rebellion in Yemen? The Islamic State in Syria? Or countering Iran? MbS, the thirty-year-old favorite son of King Salman, is often seen as the architect of the Yemen war. Correspondingly, his trip to the front two days before heading to Europe possibly cast doubt on the seriousness of the Saudis' proposed involvement in Syria, ostensibly against IS, though more likely using that role as a cover to help the anti-Assad rebels. Just over a year after taking on the defense portfolio, MbS's paramount position in Saudi decisionmaking is unquestioned, but his overweening ambition may transcend Saudi capabilities. The recent mocking comment by an Iranian military

commander about the Saudi offer to intervene in Syria may be at least partially a valid criticism.

Historically, Saudi Arabia's military prowess has seldom reflected the huge sums spent on defense, including some of the world's most advanced weapons systems. Organizationally, the ruling House of Saud, wary of the Arab world's propensity for military coups, has kept the army, navy, and air force at a distance, seeding the officer ranks with princes to protect against coup plots while preferring loyalty over competence in top commanders. In the capital, Riyadh, the Saudi Royal Guard Regiment is entrusted with the royal family's physical security, while the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) and various arms of paramilitary forces controlled by the Ministry of Interior provide overlapping layers of protection. During past times of crisis, incompatible communications systems have sometimes resulted in elements of dysfunctionality.

The Saudi intervention in Yemen was initially dubbed Operation Decisive Storm, an unfortunate labeling because the action has been less than decisive. Even Operation Restoring Hope, as the offensive was renamed four weeks after it began last March, now sounds rather forlorn given aid agencies' warnings of a humanitarian crisis and continuing civilian casualties, some of the most recent blamed on faulty cluster bombs supplied by the United States to the Royal Saudi Air Force.

With this background established, the status of current and likely Saudi military commitments is as follows:

Yemen. According to General Asiri, in a February 8 video-briefing with journalists and analysts in Washington DC, government forces, supported by the Saudi-led coalition, are now thirty to forty kilometers from the capital, Sana. The government forces, he claimed, control 85 percent of the country, but even while saying the advance on Sana would happen "soon," he emphasized that the conflict had no military solution. Challenged to counter the perception that Saudi Arabia was losing in Yemen, General Asiri asked for time, pointing out, for comparison, that the U.S. Army needed time in Afghanistan. While expressing hope that the rebellious Houthi tribes "would, *inshallah*, give up," the Saudi officer also remarked on the destabilizing role played by former president and onetime Saudi ally Ali Abdullah Saleh, who still has the loyalty of Republican Guard units and an arsenal of artillery, fighter jets and tanks, as well as "300 Scud missiles." At least ten of these missiles, aimed at targets in Saudi Arabia's southwest, including the giant air base at Khamis Mushait, have been shot down with U.S.-supplied Patriot missiles.

Two weeks earlier, at another DC briefing, a senior Western official intimately involved in Yemen had questioned whether Sana could be retaken this year. The battlefield was at a "dynamic stalemate," with pro-government forces bogged down outside the city of Taizz -- although General Asiri described the siege of Taizz as having been broken. However, the official still voiced confidence in the developing United Nations process to ease the transition back to a legitimate government. The UN has so far hosted two meetings in Switzerland, with a third on the horizon. A Saudi redline is that the kingdom cannot be seen to lose, but neither does it have the capacity, the official judged, to stabilize the country. Meanwhile, contrary to announcements in Riyadh, Saudi dead and wounded have been "in the hundreds," and even the smaller but more capable United Arab Emirates (UAE) forces have lost "a lot" of soldiers. Al-Qaeda and IS forces operate in parts of southern Yemen supposedly liberated by the Saudi-led coalition, and in the north, Houthi forces have killed more than ninety civilians and coalition soldiers in shelling and border skirmishes. The Saudis describe the Houthis as being Iran-backed, but the Western official termed Iran's involvement with the Houthis as merely "supportive" or "sympathetic."

Syria. For much of the last year, Saudi military efforts have been focused on Yemen rather than Syria, but on January 11, U.S. secretary of defense Ash Carter said that in recent weeks the Saudi air force "had resumed its participation in airstrikes" against IS targets in Syria. The flights are reportedly using Turkey's Incirlik Air Base. Saudi special forces and their UAE counterparts were also expected to be deployed -- until the February 12 announcement of a "cessation of hostilities" due to start February 19, a consequence of the diplomatic efforts pursued by Secretary of State John Kerry and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov. Until now, Saudi involvement

has been limited to training and equipping Syrian opposition groups at camps in Jordan.

Exercise in the northern region. Dubbed North Thunder, the exercise, described as "the largest military manoeuvres in the region's history," is being conducted out of the Saudi military city of Hafr al-Batin, near the Iraqi and Kuwaiti borders. Forces from twenty Arab, Muslim-majority, and "friendly" nations are taking part, from Egypt and Pakistan to Mauritania and Mauritius. A report in the English-language daily *Arab News* quoted unnamed military experts as saying the next threat to the Gulf states will likely come in this region "after Iran demographically occupies Iraq and uses that country as its military arm to meddle in the affairs of neighboring countries and drain Gulf states' resources." One analyst said the three main goals of the exercise were "to protect the joint security of the Gulf, Arab and Islamic states, increase combat readiness and coordinate joint operations between participating forces."

The list of countries taking part is interesting in that Egypt and Pakistan both declined a Saudi request last year to become militarily involved in Yemen. Also involved is Oman, which has recently avoided open expressions of diplomatic support for Riyadh, although its participation may derive from its involvement in the Gulf Cooperation Council's standing Peninsula Shield force.

Royal Family Politics

Few doubt the intense rivalry in the House of Saud between Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, or MbN, and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, respectively the notional intended successor and successor-in-waiting to the aging King Salman. The hallmark of MbN, who commands the Interior Ministry forces, is caution, which sits oddly with MbS's hyperactivity. The balance tilts toward MbN when the large paramilitary forces of SANG, commanded by Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, seen as a close ally of MbN, are taken into account. Supposedly at the center of decisionmaking on military matters is the Political and Security Council, presided over by MbN, although photos of the meetings suggest MbS is the dominant personality at such gatherings. MbN seems to have little power over either the Yemen war or Saudi diplomacy in Syria. And the so-called Islamic Military Alliance that the kingdom announced in December, comprising thirty-four Islamic countries, appears to be the brainchild of MbS. (A meeting of the alliance's defense ministers to complete arrangements is slated for late March or early April.)

Along with the sense that Saudi military capabilities are being stretched, a growing perception holds that the MbN versus MbS tensions are unsustainable within the Saudi power structure. Once considered countervailing equals, the Saudi military is emerging as preeminent -- at least in political terms -- compared with the more numerical Interior Ministry forces and the tribally recruited National Guard. When political rivals each control their own armies, tensions are increased rather than eased.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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