

Egypt's Yemen Campaign

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Mar 27, 2015

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Brief Analysis

Cairo's entry into the conflict represents an important opportunity to clarify U.S. policy toward Egypt, improve tense bilateral relations, and bolster Gulf security interests.

On March 26, Egypt announced that it would join the Saudi-led military campaign against the Iranian-backed Houthi takeover of Yemen. While the extent of Egypt's involvement is still to be determined, Cairo's decision reflects two considerations: addressing the theoretical threat that the Houthis pose to maritime security in the Red Sea, and helping its Persian Gulf allies resist Iran's hegemonic ambitions.

Egypt was not eager to enter the conflict because its prior military intervention in Yemen was extremely costly. Approximately 26,000 Egyptian soldiers died fighting Saudi-backed royalists during the 1962-1970 Yemeni civil war. Moreover, by entering the current conflict, Egypt risks stretching its military thin, since it is already fighting ISIS-affiliated jihadists in Libya and the Sinai -- without much success on either front.

The Houthi seizure of Aden on March 25, however, seemingly forced Cairo's hand. From Egypt's perspective, Houthi control of the southwestern coastal city threatens maritime traffic in Bab al-Mandab, the strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. Cairo worries that the Houthis might threaten Suez Canal traffic, which has been one of the Egyptian government's most reliable revenue streams. Over \$5.4 billion in canal tolls were collected in 2014 alone, and Egypt is currently digging a second canal that it anticipates will increase revenues to \$13.5 billion in 2023.

For this reason, the Egyptian navy will likely play a central role in the government's Yemen strategy. Egyptian and Saudi naval forces have been preparing for a possible confrontation with the Houthis, and last month's exercise in the Red Sea focused on interoperability. Moreover, Egypt reportedly sent four warships through the Suez Canal toward Bab al-Mandab yesterday morning and may aim to establish a blockade around Yemen once its heavier ships arrive next week.

Entering the Yemen conflict also allows President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to fulfill his oft-stated promise to help protect Egypt's Gulf allies, who have given Cairo approximately \$23 billion since the July 2013 overthrow of Mohamed Morsi. Indeed, shortly after taking office in June 2014, Sisi declared that Gulf security was an "inseparable part of [Egypt's] national security," and he recently called for establishing a joint Arab military force to defend the Gulf from regional threats. While the Saudi-led coalition will flesh out its Yemen strategy during a major conference in Sharm al-Sheikh this weekend, Cairo has already announced preparations for further air operations against Houthi positions, and signaled that it will send ground troops and special units if necessary.

Washington has a strong interest in helping Egypt succeed in Yemen. The U.S. military relies on safe transit through the Bab al-Mandab Strait for supporting coalition efforts against ISIS, as well as maintaining its presence in the region more broadly. Moreover, the Obama administration has declared its support for the Saudi-led coalition's "goal of restoring the legitimate authorities in Yemen," and Egypt will likely be a central player in that effort.

In addition, Egypt's entry into the conflict represents an important opportunity to clarify U.S. policy toward Cairo and improve a bilateral relationship that has been tense since Morsi's ouster. By sending the F-16 fighters and Harpoon missiles that have been withheld since October 2013, Washington can affirm its partnership and equip Cairo for advancing shared security interests in the region. And by bolstering Egypt's involvement against the Iranian-backed Houthis, the administration can reassure America's Arab allies that it will not abandon them even as it seeks a nuclear accord with Tehran.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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