

Saudi Arabia's Big Gamble

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With a new king and a young, untested defense minister, Riyadh has plunged headlong into war in Yemen, with nothing less at stake than the kingdom's leadership of the Arab world.

Breaking news: "War in the Middle East!" OK, fine. You've read this one before. But the airstrikes, troop movements, and suicide bombings that are dominating today's headlines have nothing to do with the long-running conflicts over Israel, Palestine, Syria, or Iran's nuclear program.

Don't think that the events in Yemen, however, are peripheral. They are central to the balance of power within the Arab world, to tensions within Islam, and are at the core of fears in the global oil market. The new leadership of Saudi Arabia, whose military launched airstrikes on Iranian-backed Houthi rebels on March 26 and which has been steadily securing its grip on power, is the key player in shaping the course of this volatile new war in the Middle East. Still nonplussed?

Well, consider the fact that central to Saudi decision-making is its new defense minister, Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the favorite son of the king and just two months into the job. Today's Arab News features a picture of him chairing a meeting of top Saudi commanders. His full beard does little to hide his youth -- he is variously reported to be as young as 27 or as old as 35. Either way, he has no military experience.

Two days earlier, Prince Muhammad had attended the weekly meeting of the Political and Security Affairs Council, a top decision-making body set up by the new King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. He sat opposite Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal, who has had responsibility for Saudi international affairs since before Prince Muhammad was born, and to the left of the council chairman, Interior Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammed bin Nayef, another older cousin, whom Saudi watchers see as his rival for control of the Yemen portfolio. It was Muhammad bin Salman,

not his older cousins, who traveled to Riyadh airport today to greet Yemen's president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, upon his arrival in the Saudi capital.

Prince Muhammad bin Salman may be youthful and inexperienced, but those flaws are counterbalanced by his access to his father, the 79-year-old King Salman, for whom he is said to act as a walking memory. The king's role in the development of policy on the fast-moving Yemen crisis is not clear. A crucial meeting appears to have been held on March 21, when the crown princes of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, as well as the Qatari prime minister and Kuwaiti deputy prime minister, visited Riyadh. That meeting was chaired by Interior Minister Muhammed bin Nayef, but also attended by Muhammad bin Salman. An indication of the king's actual leadership role should emerge at the Arab Summit being held this weekend at the Egyptian Red Sea resort town of Sharm el-Sheikh.

The main issue on the agenda in Sharm el-Sheikh will be the restoration of Hadi to power in Sanaa. However, at this stage, that seems to be little more than an aspiration. Today's airstrikes appear to have been intended to blunt the capability of the Houthis to threaten Saudi cities, not to wrest from them control of Yemen's capital. Saudi paranoia about the Iranian-backed rebels, who are Zaydi Shiites -- and therefore, from the perspective of many in the kingdom, not proper Muslims -- extends to the fear that they would fire missiles at Mecca.

The airstrikes, however, risk stirring Houthi antagonism rather than deterring it. Houthi leader Abdel-Malek al-Houthi condemned Saudi Arabia today as a puppet of Israel and the United States, saying his group would "confront the criminal forces and their tools in the country."

The Yemeni crisis will also clarify the extent to which King Salman's team is continuing, or diverting from, the foreign policy of the late King Abdullah. The former king was obsessed with getting rid of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and containing the role of Hezbollah in Lebanon. In one particularly colorful State Department cable released by WikiLeaks, he professed his desire to "cut off the head of the snake" -- meaning Iran.

The principal difference in Saudi Arabia's new leadership so far is that Salman's relationship with Qatar's new emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, appears to be much better than Abdullah's relationship with the previous leadership of the wealthy Gulf neighbor. Time will tell if this is just a stylistic, or a substantive, change. Despite Qatar's return to the fold after a recent diplomatic spat with Riyadh, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) -- made up of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman -- still seems to be a five- rather than six-member body, because of Oman's erratic behavior.

Oman's reclusive leader, Sultan Qaboos, who returned this week from eight months of medical treatment in Germany, seems to enjoy being the odd man out. When the Houthis seized Sanaa last month, they immediately announced the introduction of 28 flights a week between Yemen and Iran (up from zero). The flights, which could carry Iranian weapons and perhaps even advisors, fly over Oman. So much for GCC solidarity.

The big question is the extent to which the Houthis are backed by Iran -- and whether Tehran regards the Houthi takeover as having been a strategic goal, or a fortuitous consequence of events. Certainly, Iran knows how to play on Arab phobias: Last year's comment by a parliamentarian in Tehran that three Arab capitals -- Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut -- were already in Iran's control led to the widespread perception that Sanaa has become the fourth.

The Arab summit may also signify that Egypt is making a comeback as a regional leader in the Middle East. As Hosni Mubarak aged and his economy creaked, Saudi Arabia effectively added the leadership of the Arab world to its existing status as self-proclaimed leader of the Islamic world. This standing accelerated during Mohamed Morsi's chaotic year in power. But since the emergence of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi -- and the geriatric transition in Saudi Arabia, not to mention the collapse in the price of oil -- Egypt's claim to be the top dog has strengthened. Cairo now appears on the verge of entering the war in Yemen, as well.

A diplomatic rivalry for regional leadership may not yet be brewing, but both nations have geographical interests in

making sure that the crisis in Yemen abates. Saudi Arabia regards Yemen as its backyard, and faces a potential terrorist threat from jihadis who have established themselves in the country's hinterlands. Egypt is far more distant -- but Yemen controls the Bab el-Mandeb Strait at the southern entrance to the Red Sea. Less oil goes through these sea lanes than through the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, but any interference impacts on the Suez Canal at the northern end, Egypt's greatest strategic asset.

A surprising feature of "Operation Decisive Storm," as the Saudi-led operation in Yemen has been named, is the number and size of reported commitments to the coalition. The Saudis are contributing 100 fighter jets, 150,000 soldiers, and some naval units, Bahrain is deploying 15 fighter jets, and Kuwait has committed the same number. Qatar is deploying 10 fighter jets while Jordan is contributing six. Even Sudan is promising three jets. Egypt is deploying unspecified naval and air force units, and ground forces will be deployed "if necessary." The contributions involved in action against the Islamic State in Syria have been paltry in comparison.

So far, however, none of these states appear to have a "Plan B" if Hadi cannot be put back in his presidential palace. Such a failure will be at best embarrassing for Saudi Arabia -- especially its new, and perhaps short-lived, defense minister. For Sisi, however, such a course of events could present an opportunity to reassert Egyptian leadership across the Middle East.

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

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