

Small War or Big Problem? Fighting on the Yemeni-Saudi Border

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Long-running tension between the government of Yemen and a rebellious clan in a remote border area has the potential to erupt into a major regional crisis, with media reports suggesting that the tension has the characteristics of a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. On November 10, the Iranian foreign minister Manoucher Motaki warned against foreign intervention, an apparent reference to Saudi Arabia. The prospect exists that Yemen, already a haven for al-Qaeda elements, could become a failed state. Handling this challenge looks to be an early test of the executive competence of a new generation of Saudi leadership.

Government Offensive

The current fighting dates from this past August, when the government in Sana started an offensive, code-named Operation Scorched Earth, against fighters of the Houthi clan who were blockading roads in the mountainous northwest of the country, near the border with Saudi Arabia. Sana regarded these acts as a violation of a truce arranged last year. Combating the rebels has been tough: some government forces have been taken prisoner, and rebel video footage has shown destroyed Yemeni armor. Many refugees have fled the area, and civilians have been among the casualties.

The Houthis, who take their name from the family of their leader, say they want increased local autonomy and a greater role for their Zaydi version of Islam, which is Shiite and typically regarded as moderate. The group has close links to local Sunnis, who are in the majority. Indeed, President Ali Saleh of Yemen is himself a Zaydi. Until the latest fighting, analysis based on discussion of a Sunni-Shiite divide, often a useful way to understand other parts of the Middle East, was usually inappropriate for Yemen. Now, however, the fighting in northern Yemen has the makings of a proxy war, with Iran (Shiite) supporting the Houthi rebels and Saudi Arabia (Sunni) responding with support for President Saleh.

The fighting between the Houthis and government forces dates back to 2004 - 2005, and it continued even after the rebel leader, Hussein al-Houthi, was killed. More fighting broke out in 2007, but the new leader, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, a brother of Hussein al-Houthi, accepted a ceasefire. Clashes erupted once again in early 2008 before Qatari diplomats could arrange a truce.

Although the Houthi forces lack aircraft and armored vehicles, they arguably have a tactical advantage in the confrontation owing to their numbers and training as well as their skillful use of land mines. Houthi websites show rallies with high attendance, along with disciplined training sequences reminiscent of Hizballah activities in Lebanon. Claims by the Sana government of Iranian involvement are bolstered by the slogans posted on one Houthi website: "Allah is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, and victory for Islam." Such language suggests aims that far exceed a quest for local autonomy.

On November 4, the Saudi Air Force launched strikes using F-15 and Tornado ground-attack aircraft against rebels who, according to Riyadh, had crossed the border into Saudi Arabia and killed several Saudis. Media reports that the Saudi aircraft had struck targets across the border in Yemen were denied in both capitals. Then, on November 8, a Yemeni fighter crashed, an incident that was attributed to mechanical problems by Sana officials but claimed by rebels as a successful takedown by anti-aircraft fire. The present story of possible Iranian involvement goes back into late October, when Yemen seized an Iranian ship loaded with weaponry that included antitank weapons. Adding to the intrigue, the most recent video to appear on a Houthi website shows a captured Saudi special forces soldier, seized Saudi arms and vehicles, and what appears to be Saudi aircraft dropping white phosphorus on rebel positions in the mountains.

Regional Implications

The crisis in Yemen could have serious consequences for Gulf security. The most populous state in the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is also the poorest -- as well as the poorest Arab country overall, as measured by gross domestic product per capita. The African continent lies just eighteen miles away, across the Bab al-Mandab Strait, through which more than three million barrels of oil pass daily en route to Europe. And across the Gulf of Aden -- a present-day cauldron of piracy and the site of a 2002 al-Qaeda attack on an oil tanker -- is the failed state of Somalia. Usama bin Laden's father also hails from Yemen, where, according to Sana officials, thousands of al-Qaeda fighters still find refuge. Although the country has existed in some form for hundreds of years, its current configuration dates only to 1990, when North Yemen and South Yemen united. In 1994, the government quashed a rebellion by southerners seeking independence, but resentment of Sana's domination persists.

Implications for the Saudis

Historically, Saudi Arabia is cautious as regards involvement in Yemeni affairs. During the Yemeni civil war in the 1960s, the Saudis supported the royalist side, while Egypt, using chemical weapons, backed the ultimately victorious republican forces. Decades later, when President Saleh backed Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the kingdom expelled several hundred thousand Yemenis, until then a key part of its labor force. The border between the two countries has also been in question, with the Yemenis previously making claims to the kingdom's southern provinces. While that issue has now apparently been resolved, Riyadh sometimes mishandles the local population, the majority of whom are Zaydis (as are Yemenis across the border) and Ismailis. Both groups are subject to discrimination by the Saudi (Wahhabi) religious police. In early 2001, the Saudi authorities temporarily lost control of the provincial capital of Najran after the religious police cracked down on local groups.

In the current crisis, the Saudi council of ministers has pledged "zero tolerance for intruders," an apparent reference to Houthi rebels. Interestingly, King Abdullah has

effectively delegated management to the next generation of princes. Prince Khaled bin Sultan, assistant defense minister and the son of ailing Crown Prince Sultan, visited troops at the border on November 8 and declared a "killing zone" stretching six miles into Saudi territory. Another key figure is Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the counterterrorism chief, who had a narrow escape in late August when an al-Qaeda fighter who had arrived from Yemen blew himself apart while supposedly surrendering. Also involved are Abdullah's son Prince Mishal bin Abdullah, who was appointed governor of Najran earlier this year, and the king's nephew Prince Mansour bin Miteb, who replaced his aging father as minister for municipal and rural affairs just last week. A particular challenge is that the kingdom feels obliged, despite the border tension, to allow Yemeni pilgrims to visit the holy city of Mecca during the current Hajj season. On November 8, Prince Mishal bin Abdullah instructed officials to keep border crossing points open.

U.S. Policy

For Washington, the border tension compounds an already complicated relationship. Ever since the USS Cole was blown up in Aden harbor by al-Qaeda in 2000, the United States has felt that Yemen has not acted strongly enough against al-Qaeda fighters. Even imprisoned fighters have often been released or apparently allowed to escape. This scenario complicates the Obama administration's efforts to close the Guantanamo Bay detention center, where Yemenis form the largest residual national contingent. U.S. efforts to persuade President Saleh to allow these detainees to be sent to Saudi rehabilitation programs -- because Washington does not trust Yemen to look after the detainees sufficiently -- have failed so far. On the other hand, Washington has worked successfully with Sana to arrange for the emigration of members of Yemen's remaining Jewish community, which has been targeted by both the Houthis and al-Qaeda.

The State Department has aired its view that the conflict between the Houthis and the Yemeni central government will not be resolved through military means. But, for their part, Yemeni officials warn privately that the state could be threatened if Sana is not helped with military supplies and given latitude to pursue its military campaign. On the diplomatic front, Sana hopes that it can sort out its relations with Iran while, for now, simply asking the Houthis, estimated at between 6,000 and 7,000 armed men, to give up their military positions. Sana fears that the Houthis -- encouraged by Tehran -- aim to undermine U.S. and Saudi interests in its corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Such a view will be tested during the coming winter months, which, in Yemen's mountains, unlike much of the rest of the world, are the best time for fighting.

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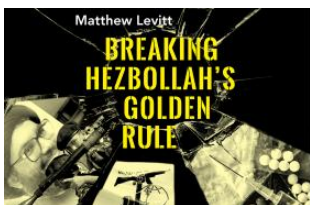
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