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Yemen Invasion Could Define Saudi Policy for Years to Come

By Jason Ditz

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On the eve of the Saudi Arabian invasion of Yemen, the Saudi government is showing boundless confidence and no small bellicosity, aiming to attack the Houthis, a dominant faction in Yemen, in hopes of restoring a more pro-Saudi government to power. They are desperate to portray this as a counter to Iran.

Yet the Saudis are risking much in deciding on intervention, insinuating themselves into a growing sectarian war to the south and all but assuring that sectarianism within Saudi territory itself will be ignited.

This is not the first Saudi intervention abroad, a previous move to back the Bahraini crackdown looms large. This was a brief intervention, conspiring with the royal family to kill the calls for democratic reform in the Shi'ite majority island nation. Again, Iran was used as the excuse.

The real fear, however, seems to be any sort of Shi'ite representation near Saudi Arabia, because the Saudis have their own Shi'ite minority, which could punch well above its weight in the case of unrest since they live predominantly in the oil-rich parts of the nation.

Yemen, like Bahrain, has seen its significant Shi'ite population underserved by regimes, with the Houthis' northern homeland among Yemen's poorest and least developed. The uprising is a result both of this lack of development and several violent crackdowns on them by the Hadi and Saleh governments in the past.

The Saudi gamble is that a decisive crackdown against the Houthis will be sufficient to cow them back into submission, and by extension set the precedent that regional Shi'ites will remain content with second-class status.

If this war does not quickly and decisively end, and there is no real sign that it will beyond Saudi confidence, they will risk inflaming Shi'ite assertiveness in Bahrain, in Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the region. The Yemen quagmire could prove costly indeed.