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Tehran thwarted

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It was all going so well in Tehran. Iran was running circles around major countries in nuclear talks, backing a Shia government in Baghdad, claiming the undivided loyalty of Hezbollah in Beirut, shoring up an expired regime in Damascus, and well satisfied with the feats of its Houthi supporters in Sanaa.

Four Arab capitals and counting, the mullahs must have been patting themselves on the back. Until they were hit with a perfect storm. The ten-nation coalition that sent waves of fighter planes to punish the Houthis in Yemen was formed almost overnight, and immediately went into action. Not waiting for Western endorsement, although the US offered logistical and intelligence support, Arab countries for once drew a line.

Now the Iranians are all up in arms about it, condemning the action at international forums, calling the move “illegal”, frothing at the mouth about Yemen’s “territorial integrity” and accusing the coalition of interfering in others’ “internal affairs.”

Rich coming from a country that makes a habit of breaking international law, where the national sport is meddling in the internal affairs of other countries, and that mocks international norms legality every step of the way.

The mullahs, who thought they had the entire Arab world on a string, now know better. A country that transacts in the business of not-so-subtle interference is having a taste of its own medicine. And it’s not liking it.

In one Friday mosque after another, government-paid preachers spoke against the coalition raids, calling them violations of international law, a slap in the face of legality, a blow to national dialogue and a cover for American and Zionist aggression.

Ironically, it was Iran that blocked every possibility of a political deal in Yemen, undermining the legitimate government while backing Houthi opponents with weapons and training.

Iran didn't say a thing about international law when the Houthis placed President Hadi under house arrest, or when they forced him to run out of the capital, or when they were grabbing towns, seizing army barracks and issuing their own "constitutional" declarations.

The Iranians were very comfortable with all of the above, but now that the Houthis are the ones on the defensive, Tehran is not amused. This is not a Sunni-Shia conflict, as some analysts seem to suggest. This is payback for an overextended, puffed-up Iranian adventurism that has put the entire region in harm's way.

The Iranians wanted to use all Shia communities in Arab countries as time bombs, turning them against the rest of the population, involving them in power games that shouldn't have been started. The Iranians have pushed their luck, throwing their weight around without thought for the future, and without respect for the boundaries of other nations' patience.

Putting the hostile Houthis in a position of power on Saudi Arabia's southern border, within reach of threatening the crucial waterway of Bab Al-Mandab, was the final straw in Iran's perilous game. Now the Iranians are pretending as if their threatening actions were but the innocent workings of harmless politics, and that the coalition is a force of evil, fighting a proxy war for the Americans and the Israelis.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohamed Javad Zarif called Operation Decisive Storm "a dangerous development that will destabilise the region," and urged dialogue among all of Yemen's parties. Hussein Amir Abdullahyan, Iranian assistant foreign minister for Arab and African Affairs, chimed in. "Concerning the events in Yemen, this new development, we consider the aerial campaign by foreign planes on Yemen areas a violation of Yemeni sovereignty and territorial integrity," Abdullahyan said.

He went on to say that countries should show respect for international law, stick to their own business, encourage peace and dialogue and refrain from sending troops across their borders.

A good message indeed, and even better had he addressed it not to Arab countries but to the Quds Force, whose "military experts" are roaming Syria and Iraq, playing domestic politics, with a clear aim of controlling regimes, seating and unseating them at will, using them as pawns in Iran's international game.

Now the game is up, and not a moment too soon.

What is quite remarkable about the Iranians is that they cannot see that respect for international law is a universal principle, not an invitation to pick and choose. In their reaction to the Saudi-led coalition's intervention in Yemen, the Iranians keep referring to international law and how the coalition should have consulted with the UN and sought mediation, and so on.

Well, is this not what everyone has been telling the Iranians forever? Did they consult with the UN before sending Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders to Syria, before ordering Hezbollah's militias to prop up Al-Assad, before they spread chaos in Iraq with their sectarian policies?

It is time for the Iranians to look in the mirror and see their real face.