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The Yemen War

Redrawing the Faultlines

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Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world, bereft of resources, fractured by tribal divisions and religious sectarianism, and plagued by civil war. And yet this small country tucked into the bottom of the Arabian Peninsula is shattering old alliances and spurring new and surprising ones. As Saudi Arabia continues its air assault on Houthis insurgents, supporters and opponents of the Riyadh monarchy are reconfiguring the political landscape in a way that is unlikely to vanish once the fighting is over.

The Saudi version of the war is that Shiite Iran is trying to take over Sunni Yemen using proxies—the Houthis—to threaten the Kingdom's southern border and assert control over the strategic Bab al-Mandeb Strait into the Red Sea. The Iranians claim they have no control over the Houthis, no designs on the Straits, and that the war is an internal matter for the Yeminis to resolve.

The Saudis have constructed what at first glance seems a formidable coalition consisting of the Arab League, the monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Turkey and the U.S. Except that the "coalition" is not as solid as it looks and is more interesting in whom it doesn't include than whom it does.

Egypt and Turkey are the powerhouses in the alliance, but there is more sound and fury than substance in their support.

Initially, Egypt made noises about sending ground troops—the Saudi army can't handle the Houthis and their allies—but pressed by *Al-Monitor*, Cairo's ambassador to Yemen, Youssef al-Sharqawy, turned opaque: "I am not the one who will decide about a ground intervention in Yemen. This goes back to the estimate of the supreme authority in the country and Egyptian national security."

Since Saudi Arabia supported the Egyptian military coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government and is propping up the regime with torrents of cash, Riyadh may eventually squeeze Cairo to put troops into the Yemen war. But the last time Egypt fought the Houthis it suffered thousands of casualties, and Egypt has its hands full with an Islamic insurrection in Sinai.

While Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan also pledged Ankara's support for "Saudi Arabia's intervention," and demanded that "Iran and the terrorist groups" withdraw, Erdogan was careful to say that it "may consider" offering "logistical support based on the evolution of the situation."

Erdogan wants to punish Iran for its support of the Assad regime in Syria and its military presence in Iraq, where Teheran is aiding the Baghdad government against the Islamic Front. He is also looking to tap into Saudi money. The Turkish economy is in trouble, its public debt is the highest it has been in a decade and borrowing costs are rising worldwide. With an important election coming in June, Erdogan is hoping the Saudis will step in to help out.

But actually getting involved is another matter. The Turks think the Saudis are in a pickle—Yemen is a dreadfully difficult place to win a war and an air assault without ground troops has zero chance of success.

When the Iranians reacted sharply to Erdogan's comments, the President backpeddled. Iran is a major trading partner for the Turks, and, with the possibility that international sanctions against Teheran will soon end, Turkey wants in on the gold rush that is certain to follow. During Erdogan's recent trip to Teheran, the Turkish President and Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif issued a joint statement calling for an end to the war in Yemen, and a "political solution." It was a far cry from Erdogan's initial belligerence.

The Arab League supports the war, but only to varying degrees. Iraq opposes the Saudi attacks, and Algeria is keeping its distance by calling for an end to "all foreign intervention." Even the normally compliant GCC, representing the oil monarchs of the Gulf, has a defector. Oman abuts Yemen, and its ruler, Sultan Qaboos, is worried the chaos will spread across its border. And while the United Arab Emirates have flown missions over Yemen, the UAE is also preparing to cash in if sanctions are removed from Teheran. "Iran is on our doorstep, we have to be there," Marwan Shehadeh, a developer in Dubai told the *Financial Times*. "It could be a great game changer."

The most conspicuous absence in the Saudi coalition, however, is Pakistan, a country that has received billions in aid from Saudi Arabia and whose current Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, was sheltered by Riyadh from the wrath of Pakistan's military in 1999.

When the Saudi's initially announced their intention to attack Yemen, they included Pakistan in the reported coalition, an act of hubris that backfired badly. Pakistan's Parliament demanded a debate on the issue and then voted unanimously to remain neutral. While Islamabad declared its intention to "defend Saudi Arabia's sovereignty," no one thinks the Houthis are about to march on Jiddah.

The Yemen war is deeply unpopular in Pakistan, and the Parliament's actions were widely supported, one editorial writer calling for rejecting "GCC diktat." Only the extremist Lashkar-e-Taiba organization, which planned the 2008 Mumbai massacre in India, supported the Saudis.

Pakistan has indeed relied on Saudi largesse and, in turn, provided security for Riyadh, but the relationship is wearing thin.

First, there is widespread outrage for the Saudi support of extremist Islamic groups, some of which are at war with Pakistan's government. Last year one such organization, the Tehrik-i-Taliban, massacred 145 people, including 132 students, in Peshawar. Fighting these groups in North Waziristan has taxed the Pakistani Army, which must also pay attention to its southern neighbor, India.

The Saudis, with their support for the rigid Wahabi interpretation of Islam, are also blamed for growing Sunni-Shiite tensions in Pakistan.

Second, Islamabad is deepening its relationship with China. In mid-April, Chinese President Xi Jinping promised to invest $46 billion to finance Beijing's new "Silk Road" from Western China to the Persian Gulf. Part of this will include a huge expansion of the port at Gwadar in Pakistan's restive Baluchistan province, a port that Bruce Riedel says will "rival Dubai or Doha as a regional economic hub,"

Riedel is a South Asia security expert, a senior fellow at the conservative Brookings Institute, and a professor at Johns Hopkins. Dubai is in the United Arab Emirates and Doha in Qatar. Both are members of the GCC.

China is concerned about security in Baluchistan, with its long-running insurgency against the central government, as well as the ongoing resistance by the Turkic-speaking, largely Muslim, Uyghur people in western China's Xinjiang Province. Uyghurs, who number a little over 10 million, are being marginalized by an influx of Han Chinese, China's dominant ethnic group.

Wealthy Saudis have helped finance some of these groups and neither Beijing or Islamabad is happy about it. Pakistan has pledged to create a 10,000-man "Special Security Division" to protect China's investments. According to Riedel, the Chinese told the Pakistanis that Beijing would "stand by Pakistan if its ties with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates unravel."

The U.S. has played an important, if somewhat uncomfortable, role in the Yemen War. It is feeding Saudi Arabia intelligence and targeting information and re-fueling Saudi warplanes in mid-air. It also intercepted an Iranian flotilla headed for Yemen that Washington claimed was carrying arms for the Houthis. Iran denies it and there is little hard evidence that Teheran is providing arms to the insurgents.

But while Washington supports the Saudis, it has also urged Riyadh to dial back the air attacks and look for a political solution. The U.S. is worried that the war-induced anarchy is allowing Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to florish. The embattled Houthis were the terrorist group's principal opponents.

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen is growing critical. More than a 1,000 people, many of them civilians, have been killed, and the bombing and fighting has generated 300,000 refugees. The Saudi-U.S. naval blockade and the recent destruction of Yemen's international airport has shut down the delivery of food, water and medical supplies in a country that is largely dependent on imported food.

However, the Obama administration is unlikely to alienate the Saudis, who are already angry with Washington for negotiating a nuclear agreement with Iran. Besides aiding the Saudi attacks, the U.S. has opened the arms spigot to Riyadh.

The Iran nuclear agreement has led to what has to be one of the oddest alliances in the region: Israel and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is on the same wavelength as the Netanyahu government when it comes to Iran, and the two are cooperating in trying to torpedo the agreement. According to investigative journalist Robert Perry, the alliance between Tel Aviv and Riyadh was sealed by a secret $16 billion gift from Riyadh to an Israeli "development" account in Europe, some of which has been used to build illegal settlements in the Occupied Territories.

The Saudis and the Israelis are on the same side in the Syrian civil war as well, and, for all Riyadh's talk about supporting the Palestinians, the only members of the GCC that have given money to help rebuild Gaza after last summer's Israeli attack on Gaza are Qatar and Kuwait.

How this all falls out in the end is hard to predict, except that it is clear that, for all their financial firepower, the Saudis can't get the major regional players—Israel excepted—on board. And an alliance with Israel—a country that is more isolated today because of its occupation policies than it has been in its history—is not likely to be very stable.

Long-time Middle East correspondent for the *Independent* Robert Fisk says the Saudis live in "fear" of the Iranians, the Shiia, the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, U.S. betrayal, Israeli plots, even "themselves, for where else will the revolution start in Sunni Muslim Saudi but among its own royal family?"

That "fear" is driving the war in Yemen. It argues for why the U.S. should stop feeding the flames and instead join with the European Union and demand an immediate cease-fire, humanitarian aid, and a political solution among the Yemenis themselves.