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Saudi Arabia's Unholy War

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Saudi Arabia's campaign in Yemen has boosted popular support for the Houthis and is fueling greater anti-Saudi sentiment.

Since it began its war on the Houthis in March 2015, Saudi Arabia has justified its intervention as a broader holy duty to fight Shia and protect the government in exile. Yet Yemenis increasingly view Saudi intervention more as a campaign—in which they are collateral—to upgrade Riyadh's own influence and an ill-conceived effort to promote Mohammed Bin Salman as a powerful future Saudi king. As such, Yemenis fail to see any moral or legal justification for the U.S.-backed Saudi war. What is evident to them is the deliberate destruction of people and capital—all to no end, as the war has failed to accomplish Saudi Arabia's goal of weakening the Houthis. Instead, the airstrikes and blockade that form the core of Saudi Arabia's strategy have increased anti-Saudi hatred, driving greater numbers of Yemenis to support the Houthis every day.

The war has done particular damage to infrastructure—including reservoirs, airports, electric power stations, bridges and roads, markets, factories, stadiums, and hospitals. The education sector has been hit especially hard, with 39 universities damaged, 810 primary and secondary schools damaged, and another 3,809 closed. About 85 percent of the population of 27 million is in dire need of food, water, medicine, and fuel. Over 2.5 million Yemenis are displaced, and the attacks have killed or injured more than 23,000 civilians—among them thousands of women and

children—using internationally prohibited weapons such as cluster bombs, as documented by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

Despite this devastation, Riyadh has failed to achieve its strategic goals. Its primary targets, Abdelmalek al-Houthi and Ali Abdullah Saleh, remain unharmed and able to move about the country relatively freely, and almost all well-known Houthi leaders are still alive. Abu Ali al-Hakem, the commander of Houthi forces who is sanctioned by UN, has had unrestricted movement in Yemen as he travels to Aden, Saada, and Hodeida, meeting with tribal leaders and holding pro-Houthi rallies. On Houthi-seized military bases, ballistic missiles—including SCUD, Tochka, and Qaher-1 missiles—are still intact and in use. As Saudis fail to take out targeted Houthis, it becomes clear that they lack a cohesive strategy or even the required intelligence to carry out operations within Yemen. When Houthis and their allies carry out operations in Najran, Jaizan, and Asir, frequently Saudi F-16 jets instead strike unrelated targets in Sanaa first—including army commanders' homes they know are empty—rather than admit they don't know whom to strike.

In addition to billions of dollars spent on the military war, Saudi Arabia has spent huge amounts supporting Yemeni actors they hope could carry the fight on their behalf, from President Abd Rabu Mansour Hadi to thousands of tribesmen, politicians, and intellectuals in southern and northern Yemen. But this tactic has not been able to secure lasting loyalty, especially as Saudi Arabia is struggling to keep up rising expenses. In July 2015, Saudis promised to give 2000-rial (\$530) salaries to every Yemeni soldier recruited for the popular resistance committees in Taiz, but they delayed payments for several months thereafter to confirm the names on the list.

In many ways the unrecognized government under Mohammed Ali al-Houthi is in a better position domestically than President Hadi and his Saudi-backed government. Hadi, currently in Riyadh, has become completely dependent on external support. By contrast, the Houthis, though they lack international legitimacy, have seen their popularity rise with every Saudi airstrike. Many Yemenis have already started to glorify those killed by the Saudi campaign. Hundreds of families turned their relatives' funerals into wedding ceremonies. In some cases, the mothers of some young men killed celebrate as if they were in weddings and congratulate the dead sons as bridegrooms. The fathers boast that they are ready to give all their remaining sons as martyrs for the cause of Allah and the nation against Saudi "invaders and occupiers."

Houthis are taking advantage of their newfound support to rally Yemenis who no longer have anything to lose. In May 2015, the Yemeni army, with tribal support, took control over many important strategic locations, villages, and cities in Najran, Jizan, and Asir. Since mid-December 2015, Yemeni forces have fired ballistic missiles on vital sites within Saudi Arabia like Jizan airport, Aramco oil installations, and the Faisal military base. Hundreds of Saudi soldiers were killed or injured and dozens arrested. Yemeni army spokesman Brigadier-General Sharaf Ghalib Luqman declared that the Saudi frontlines had fallen to the Yemeni army and that further attacks on these provinces would be considered a political decision, not a military one. This echoes Sayyid Abdul Malik al-Houthi's statements in August 2015 that such advances on major Saudi cities were "strategic options" to put pressure on Riyadh if Saudi aggression does not stop.

To support this, many tribesmen—especially from the six provinces surrounding the capital Sanaa—signed the Houthi “tribal honor charter” in October 2015 to confront Saudi aggression. The Houthis aimed to have more than one million Yemenis back the charter through public rallies in cities and villages across the country, particularly in Taiz and Mareb. Since rallies began in early September 2015, the charter has also been signed by tribal leaders, politicians, and intellectuals from southern and eastern provinces currently based in Sanaa, many of whom have put aside inter-tribal disputes and have provided military and monetary support. This tribal support reflects increasing popularity for Houthis and their allies, while the government in exile is seen as largely propped up by external actors.