

War in Yemen: The African Dimension

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Summary

The war in Yemen and its exacerbation through international military intervention is a tragedy first and foremost for the Yemeni people as their state fragments and thousands of lives and livelihoods are lost. Yet the shifting alignments that the build-up to Operation Decisive Storm has occasioned in inter-Arab relations may also have far-reaching consequences for Northeast Africa. Saudi Arabia's growing rapprochement with Qatar, Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood may be an opportunity for conflict resolution in Libya but it will cement the power of Sudan's once isolated regime.

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The internationalisation of the war in Yemen since late March has sucked in a coalition of nine Arab states, the United States and, reportedly backing the Ansar Allah (better known as Houthis) insurgency, Iran. Operation Decisive Storm, the Saudi-led intervention, is the most overt manifestation yet of the rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran as the Middle East's competing regional powers. While the degree to which Iran supports and influences the Houthi movement, which has gradually seized Yemeni territory and power since September, is highly questionable, Saudi Arabia clearly perceives the advance of this Zaydi Shi'a-based group as an attempt by Tehran to encircle it.

Yet there is little new in this dynamic bar Saudi Arabia and its allies' willingness to commit their armed forces to open warfare. Iran, after all, has been committing its advisers, trainers, troops, militia and/or aircraft to battles against Saudi-backed factions in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon for years.

Three factors are more novel. The first is Saudi Arabia's willingness to lead a major military campaign without a significant offensive role for the United States. This may be over-stated given the Obama administration's preference for supporting rather than leading new foreign operations. The US makes no secret of its support for Decisive Storm, nor of its accelerated provision of weapons, training, intelligence, aerial reconnaissance, refuelling and combat search and rescue capacities. Moreover, it has continued to mount its own drone strikes against al-Qaida targets in Yemen. All but one of Saudi Arabia's nine allies in the operation is a major US ally and most host US military bases. The exception, as will be discussed, is Sudan. Riyadh may be making a point to Washington that it can operate independently should the current US-Iranian rapprochement gather pace, but it remains hugely dependent on US, British and French military technology, training and intelligence.

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The second is the willingness of Egypt, Saudi's closest rival to leadership of the Arab world, to commit its forces to battle far from home. This is not the first time Egypt has fought in Yemen. General Nasser, Egypt's last great proponent of Arab nationalism, deployed tens of thousands of troops there in the 1960s, with many thousands dying to protect the (North) Yemeni republic. But since then, Egypt's military has focussed on its immediate neighbourhood: Israel, Libya and Sudan. That it has revived its role now, after years of neutrality in Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, says much about President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regional ambitions, his country's dependence on Saudi and Gulf Arab financial support, Egypt's perceptions of Yemen's strategic importance in controlling access to the Red Sea, and its expectations of reciprocal support near its own borders, in Libya.

The third and perhaps the most significant novelty relates to Saudi Arabia's defrosting relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood and its backers. In committing its military to what it perceives as an existential struggle to oppose the advance of Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia has had to roll back on its hostility to the Brotherhood, whose Islamist democracy has been seen as a major populist challenge to the House of Saud's Wahhabi monarchy. Other factors that have focused Gulf Arab leaders on the need to heal their divisions over support for the Brotherhood include fears over US commitment to a deal with Iran over its nuclear programme, the spent appeal of the Arab Spring revolutions, and the more acute threat from Islamic State.

Starting with rapprochement with Qatar in November and gathering pace under new King Salman with a Saudi-Turkish summit in early March, Saudi Arabia and its allies have moved to heal the schism within the Sunni bloc. Although ideologically hard to swallow, these efforts have nevertheless facilitated Saudi

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policy towards Syria, where Brotherhood-affiliates are prominent alongside Salafist groups in the struggle to overthrow Iran-allied President Bashar al-Assad. In Yemen, the Brotherhood-affiliated Islah party is prominent among the factions pushed out of power by the Houthi advance and the current enemy of Riyadh's enemies. The presence within the Saudi-led coalition of Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), both of which remain implacably opposed to the Brotherhood, along with Qatar, the financial backer of Egypt's ousted Brotherhood regime, and Sudan, ruled by a Brotherhood-origin party since 1989, is thus highly notable.

African Interests

Three of the ten members of the Decisive Storm alliance are African Arab countries. In addition to Egypt and Sudan is the Kingdom of Morocco, a close ally of the conservative Gulf monarchies, Jordan and the US and already involved in their air campaign against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. A fourth, Djibouti (a member of the Arab League, though with few Arab citizens), allows its territory to be used by US warships, aircraft, special operations forces and especially armed drones. A fifth, Somalia, has officially offered use of its airspace, waters and ports to the coalition.

Each of the African coalition members has its own reasons for supporting Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, although the desire to consolidate financial support or investment from the Gulf Arab states is a common denominator. Unlike Pakistan or some of the Gulf emirates, none has any significant Shi'a population or feels directly threatened by Iran. Nonetheless, Operation Decisive Storm may have implications for four conflict zones in Northern Africa and the Horn.

Libya

The Libyan civil war has become increasingly internationalised since 2014 as a proxy battlefield for states that support and oppose the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood. Islamist parties and factions have considerable influence in the Tripoli-based General National Congress (GNC) administration, while the Western- and Arab League-recognised, Tobruk-based House of Representatives and its militia allies have a more secular orientation. With no significant non-Sunni population in Libya, there is no suggestion of Iranian meddling. Rather, Egypt and the UAE have been relatively open in their support for the Tobruk government, including air strikes against its opponents, with at least the acquiescence of Saudi Arabia, the US and Russia. Turkey, Qatar and Sudan have been accused of backing the GNC and supplying Islamist militias.

With the gradual healing of the rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the potential for de-escalation of the proxy war in Libya would seem to be good. Inclusion of Sudan with Egypt in the Decisive Storm coalition should also build confidence between these traditionally antagonistic neighbours. However, reconciliation between Egypt and the UAE, on the one hand, and Qatar and Turkey on the other, is proceeding more cautiously. Egypt may be strongly aligned with Saudi on Yemen but Brotherhood influence remains top of its own security concerns. Its price for supporting the campaign against perceived Iranian influence in Yemen will be Saudi pressure on Qatar and perhaps Turkey to discontinue their support for the GNC.

The rapid growth of Islamic State activity and allegiance among the myriad Libyan militias since February has also tended to bolster external support for a political settlement in Libya. The Islamic State threat may not be felt as acutely by Egypt or the Gulf Arab states as by the US or Europe but there is consensus

within the Arab League around opposing its further expansion. War between the two rival administrations in Libya has tended to stoke the activity of Islamic State-allied groups in the interstices.

The shifting of Arab geopolitics has had some impact on the ground in Libya in 2015. Since January, the UN mediator has managed to get both sides to attend talks on a unity government in Switzerland, Morocco and Algeria. Among civilian politicians and tribal leaders, at least, there seems to be increasing appetite for a settlement to stave off disintegration.

Yet real progress has been scant. Hostilities have continued, even escalated, as the Egyptian-supplied administration has pushed its aerial advantage, seized the opportunity to move forces towards Tripoli, and attempted to wrest control of Libya's dwindling oil revenues from the Central Bank. The GNC and its militia allies are increasingly isolated and divided, as witnessed by the sacking of its prime minister, Omar al-Hassi, on 31 March. Despite growing international pressure for a peace settlement, the waning of the military stalemate between east and west may make it more difficult to reach compromise. There is also the risk that GNC politicians reach a settlement unacceptable to their more hardline militia, which might then pursue more radical alliances.

Sudan

Sudan stands alone in the Decisive Storm coalition as the only state not aligned with the US. More than this, it has been widely seen as an ally and security partner of Iran and, as the Brotherhood-ruled former host (1991-96) of Osama Bin Laden, a threat to Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Its presence in the alliance thus appears to mark a significant geopolitical shift within the Arab

world. Under enormous economic pressure since the secession of South Sudan in 2011, and long isolated from its African and Arab peers, Sudan will expect to receive generous financial support from Saudi Arabia and perhaps other Gulf Arab states than Qatar, its recent patron. There were reports in early April that several billion dollars in Saudi funds had been invested in the Sudanese central bank to stabilise the local currency. Saudi agricultural and industrial investment is also being courted.

Whatever the outcome to its south in Yemen, Saudi Arabia will thus believe that it has bought off an Iranian threat to its west from across the Red Sea. Egypt, which fears the influence of the Brotherhood rather than Iran, has also pursued a rapprochement with Sudan since el-Sisi secured his election as president in mid-2014. Both countries signed an agreement with upstream neighbour Ethiopia on use of Blue Nile waters, including Ethiopia's 6 Gigawatt Grand Renaissance Dam, Africa's largest hydroelectric project. Under el-Sisi, Egypt appears to be reasserting its role as the great power of northeast Africa as well as acting to restrict Sudan's purported role as a conduit for supplies to Islamist factions in Libya, Sinai and Gaza.

The lessening of Sudan's isolation seems unlikely to have a positive impact on its governance or on the various conflicts waged there against the central government. Iran never seems to have provided very much financial support to Sudan, although it is reported to have supplied small arms, unarmed drones, military training and intelligence, and possibly helped in establishing Sudan's low-tech arms industry. Gulf Arab states probably have fewer arms to sell or supply directly to Sudan but could finance arms purchases from Sudan's main suppliers in China, Pakistan or Russia. Any prop that Saudi aid and investment can provide to the Sudanese economy and state revenues would potentially

allow the government to spend more money on the military and its various campaigns in South Kordofan, Darfur and Blue Nile. Despite hostility to Sudan's Brotherhood-based government, there seems to have been little support from Gulf Arab states for the various insurgencies by non-Arab and non-Muslim populations. With elections just concluded, scrutiny diminishing and potentially bolstered access to arms, expect Sudan's campaigns to escalate in the autumn when the rainy season ends.

Western Sahara

The frozen conflict in Western Sahara seems unlikely to be much affected by the war in Yemen, although Morocco's involvement alongside Egypt and Gulf Arab states is to great extent conditioned by its desire to maintain Arab support for its claim to the disputed territory of Western Sahara. This is crucial because most African states, led by Algeria, recognise Western Saharan independence. Saudi Arabia is the leading Arab proponent of Morocco's claim. Iran recognises Western Saharan independence.

Algeria's support for Western Saharan independence is very unlikely to waver, nor is it likely to affect the situation on the ground, whereby Morocco comfortably occupies all of the coast, towns and productive economic resources in Western Sahara. Algeria's own oil and gas resources mean that it can stand aloof from Gulf Arab patronage. Moreover, its constitution forbids it from participation in external military actions.

Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia

One final frozen conflict with remote potential to be impacted by the shift in Saudi-Iranian rivalries to the Red Sea is the territorial dispute between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which has remained unresolved since the cessation of their

devastating war in 2000. Sudan's swing from Iran to Saudi Arabia leaves Eritrea isolated as the last potential Iranian ally in East Africa. Yet Eritrea's autocratic guerrilla-origin government thrives on isolation and balances its relations with Tehran with reasonable links to Arab states and Israel. It denies having a military basing agreement with Iran or any other state.

Should Iranian navy ships dispatched to near Yemen in early April dock in Eritrea, that country could become more directly involved in the conflict. Yet this seems very unlikely given Eritrea's interest in observing neutrality. Unlike Eritrea, Ethiopia is under no obvious pressure to reclaim land it sees as occupied since the 1998-2000 war and would probably not become involved even if Eritrea were targeted by the Saudi-led coalition.

More likely to impact on both Eritrea and Ethiopia as well as Somalia are changes to migration routes into Saudi Arabia by ex-patriate workers. There are huge diaspora populations from each country in the Gulf States; repatriated income is a major component of each economy. Periodic crackdowns and expulsions remind the African states of their dependence on Arabian goodwill.

Many workers from the Horn have entered the Gulf States illegally via a sea crossing to Yemen. With this route now essentially closed, it is likely that many more Somalis and Eritreans in particular will shift north through Sudan to Libya and the trans-Mediterranean route to asylum in Europe. Already, thousands of Yemenis and Somali refugees in Yemen have crossed to northern Somalia. Facilitating migration of Africans to Arabia is a major component of the regional economy of northern Somali ports and one reason why piracy has not taken off there as it has along the east coast. This could yet reverse.

Conclusion

Libya must be seen as a conflict resolution opportunity, not least because the alternative is the 'Somalia-isation' of this huge country and a drift to ever more violent measures. While the internal rivalries and resource competitions remain, the heat of the external proxy war in Libya is likely to fade and there is increasingly international consensus on the need for a political settlement.

Sudan is once more a conflict alert situation. While President Bashir could use his party's expected (and already much disputed) election victory and increased international engagement to relaunch the national dialogue process in Sudan, he looks far more likely to use new economic resources to divide and rule and reinvigorate his army's military campaigns in the south and Darfur.

Disruption of the migrant economy via Yemen to Arabia will also impact the conflict dynamics of Eritrea and northern Somalia through who controls economic resources. This will have spin off impact outside Africa through further dislocation of migration towards Europe and perhaps a turn to piracy or other kinds of smuggling for the Gulf of Aden's conflict entrepreneurs.

Image: The Arab League summit in Egypt in March 2015. **Source:** YouTube (Creative Commons)

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