

Saudi Arabia's Military Involvement in the Yemen Conflict

By [Rannie Amiri](#)

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It has been nearly three months since the Saudi military directly inserted itself in the conflict between Zaidi rebels and the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen's mountainous northwest governorate of Saada. After two of its border guards were killed last November by the rebels, known as Houthis (named after their erstwhile leader, Hussein Badr al-Din al-Houthi) and claims made that they had crossed into Saudi territory, a massive aerial assault was [unleashed](#).

Using U.S. and Western-supplied weapons unavailable to Saleh's government, the Saudi military employed Apache helicopters, F-15 and Tornado jets, infrared detection equipment, surveillance drones and quite possibly banned white phosphorus shells, to target Houthi positions in the rugged terrain of the border region and well into Yemen proper.

Despite their sophisticated weaponry, Saudi Arabia lost an unusually high number of soldiers; 133 at last count. Although an unknown number of Houthi fighters – and Yemeni civilians – were killed in the attacks, what is known is the great humanitarian toll the Saudi intervention exacted on the population. Already a cauldron of human suffering, malnutrition and overflowing camps for the internally displaced as a result of five years of war, the fresh offensive only added to the misery of Saada and the neighboring provinces.

Since the conflict began in 2004, aid agencies place the number of displaced Yemenis at 200,000. The Saudi government's policy of forcibly returning those fleeing the conflict back into the war zone – a morally reprehensible practice not to mention a violation of international law – was widely condemned.

This week, the Houthis announced a unilateral ceasefire and declared their intention to voluntarily withdraw from any Saudi territory occupied. The current Houthi leader, Abdul Malek al-Houthi, stated, "If the Saudi regime maintains its aggression after this initiative, it would be showing that its intention is not to defend its territory, but to invade our borders."

Yet, just after of the Houthi proposal was made, the Saudi government claimed it was they who had driven the rebels out of the border region.

"They did not withdraw. They were forced out," asserted Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khaled bin Sultan.

In order for Saudi Arabia to accept the Houthi ceasefire, Sultan said the rebels must create a 10 km buffer zone between them and the border, agree to let Yemen's military to take up positions along it, and return six captured Saudi soldiers.

Regardless of whether any tenable agreement is actually reached, it must be asked: what was accomplished by Saudi Arabia's attack on Yemen?

Militarily, nothing.

The more salient question is: what was the real message behind Saudi Arabia's (fruitless) intervention?

Although it was purportedly to defend the "territorial integrity" of the Kingdom, even supporters of the Royal Family concede it was more to stem perceived encroaching Iranian influence at its doorstep. Yet that too is a spurious argument.

To date, there has been no convincing evidence of any significant material support provided to the Houthi rebels by the Iranian government. Claims of such have been found to be no more credible than those issued by Yemen's government that Abdul Malek al-Houthi had been killed in the fighting (he appeared on video a few days later appearing quite healthy).

To understand the real motive behind the bombardment, one only needs to return to the primary demand of the Houthi rebels: an end to the ever-increasing socioeconomic marginalization and religious discrimination of the Zaidi community in Yemen.

This war was not just to aid the fledgling Saleh regime in combating an enemy far less threatening to its existence than al-Qaeda, but to send a clear message to Saudi Arabia's *own* citizens who suffer the same systemic and institutionalized discrimination as do the Zaidis. Namely, Shia Muslims, Ismaili Muslims, Sufi Muslims and any who dare challenge the authority of the House of al-Saud or the doctrines of the officially-sanctioned Wahabi school of thought.

Saudi Arabia's own oil-rich Eastern Province has seen tensions with Saudi Shia Muslims escalate in recent months as the Wahabi religious establishment clamps down ever more harshly on the practice of their religion and liberties as citizens of the state.

The senseless war in Saada waged by the Saudi government was thus meant to send an unmistakable warning to any in the Kingdom who might espouse similar beliefs or demands as the Houthis: do so at your own peril.

One wonders, though, whether those on the Saudi side who advocated or supported such reckless interventionism were aware of this equally important admonition: military force *never* succeeds in quieting the quest of people striving to achieve their basic rights, freedoms, and dignity.

Rannie Amiri is an independent Middle East commentator. He may be reached at: rbamiri@yahoo.com.

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