

Saudi Arabia's War on Yemen Comes Home

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When Saudi Arabia launched its war against Yemen in March 2015, it presumed that a short, quick, and clean air war would be enough to degrade the alliance of Houthi forces and those loyal to former President Saleh, thereby giving the Saudi-backed government of former President Hadi the necessary space to regain control of the country. However, that simply has not been the case. In fact, not only has the Saudi campaign not achieved these objectives, it has instead precipitated a much more dangerous war which has now spread to Saudi Arabia itself.

Reports from Yemeni sources have [confirmed](#) that the Houthis and their allies have launched a number of rockets into Saudi Arabia's Jizan province while also launching an assault on three military bases in various parts of the country. Of course, the attacks have sent an unmistakable message to Riyadh that there will be a price to pay for the continued bombardment of Yemen; that the Saudis cannot simply act with impunity.

War Spreads Beyond Yemen's Borders

The fact that Houthi and Saleh forces are able to successfully attack key Saudi military installations has undoubtedly rattled a few nerves in Riyadh. While the recent assaults have not been the first, they have been perhaps the most open demonstration of the military capacity of the Yemeni forces to strike at Saudi assets.

It has been [reported](#) that the Houthi-Saleh combined forces have attacked and possibly taken control of a military base in the Southwestern province of Jizan, strategically located on Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast. While of course embarrassing for the Saudi government, this development is far more than simply a public relations nightmare; it is a strategic disaster. While Yemeni forces have pounded the base in Jizan, there have been scattered reports of Yemeni attacks against other Saudi military installations, including in the East of the country, as well as in the Northwest. If these reports are to be believed, then nearly the entirety of Saudi Arabian territory is within the range and capability of Yemeni rockets.

There is clear progress from the perspective of the Ansarullah movement (aka the Houthis) and their military allies if one compares the attacks they launched back in April, and those they are carrying out today. While there were a number of high profile attempts to break through Saudi defenses on the borders and make significant gains at the time, all such attacks were either [entirely repelled](#) or were mostly unsuccessful; however today, less than two months later, Houthi offensives are becoming increasingly sophisticated and, quite predictably, increasingly effective. Although Ansarullah has fired rockets and made offensive moves towards a number of key Saudi installations throughout the country, their major breakthroughs have come in the strategic Jizan province, right near the Yemeni border.

And it remains the areas closest to the border with Yemen where the real concrete gains have been made by the anti-Saudi coalition. Whether the Houthis and their allies are able to take operational control of the Saudi bases, or merely to attack them and flee is somewhat secondary. What is of primary importance is the simple fact that essentially the entire southwestern portion of Saudi Arabia is now under direct threat from the combined Houthi-Saleh forces, in addition to newly formed militias quietly developing inside Saudi Arabia in the area near the Saudi-Yemeni border.

A Saudi Civil War?

The formation of militias committed to waging war against the House of Saud may be the single most troubling development for Riyadh. Perhaps the most significant of these is the so called '[Ahrar al-Najran' Movement](#), a coalition of regional tribes in the southwest of the country that have combined forces with anti-Riyadh Saudi political activists to create an independence movement that has taken up arms against the Saudi government.

Ahrar al-Najran presents a complex problem for the Saudis because it is comprised primarily of tribes whose lands were originally within Yemeni territory until they were occupied by Saudi forces in 1934. According to Iran's [Islamic Republic News Agency \(IRNA\)](#):

[The] Ahrar al-Najran Movement [is] calling for independence from Saudi Arabia...Abu Bakr Abi Ahmed al-Salami, a leader of Ahrar al-Najran, says the movement which brings together different tribal groups is set to launch its first battle in parts of south Najran occupied by the Saudi army...There are four main reasons why the movement wants to declare independence from Saudi Arabia:

- 1. General dissatisfaction in Saudi Arabia with the way officials in Riyadh handle day-to-day administration of affairs,*
- 2. Riyadh's policy to keep the south impoverished,*
- 3. Aggression against Yemen and the massacre of defenseless people there by the Saudi regime,*
- 4. Failure of the Saudi government to view the residents of the south as first-class citizens, thus violation [sic] of their legitimate rights.*

Needless to say, from the perspective of the Saudis, a nascent independence movement within their borders is just about the worst possible outcome of their decision to wage war on Yemen. And considering the already tense situation in the majority Shia province of Qatif, it seems Saudi Arabia has become a political powder keg just waiting for a spark. Undoubtedly the Ansarullah Movement understands this perfectly well, and is now preparing to make its move, matches in hand.

Indeed, while the Saudis will likely move quickly to assert control over the southwestern regions, the Shias of the east – undoubtedly with a bit of tacit and/or overt support from the Houthis – might find this an opportune moment to begin organizing themselves into more than just periodic demonstrations and upsurges of righteous indignation to be quickly met with vicious force.

It should be remembered that recent months have seen violent raids and clashes between Saudi security forces and residents throughout the Qatif province of Eastern Saudi Arabia, the most violent of which having taken place in the town of Awamiyah. In response to protests against Riyadh's war on Yemen, the regime's security forces unleashed a brutal

crackdown that perhaps most accurately could be called violent suppression. As one activist and resident of Awamiyah told the [Middle East Eye](#) back in April, "From 4pm until 9pm the gunfire didn't stop... Security forces shot randomly at people's homes, and closed all but one of the roads leading in and out of the village... It is like a war here – we are under siege." A number of [videos](#) uploaded to YouTube seem to confirm the accounts of activists, though all eyewitness accounts remain anonymous for fear of government retribution.

Such actions as those described by activists in Awamiyah, and throughout Qatif, are nothing new. Over the last few years, the province has repeatedly seen upsurges of [protests](#) against the draconian policies of the government in Riyadh. Were such protests to once again erupt, and were they to coincide with the burgeoning Sunni independence movement in the Southwest, one could then rightly characterize the unrest as a general uprising: truly a nightmare scenario for the Saudi government.

Saudi Arabia's war on Yemen has taken a tremendous toll on that impoverished country, with untold thousands of casualties, countless families displaced, infrastructure devastated, and the delivery of basic services slowed to a trickle, if not cut off altogether. The Saudis have perpetrated a flagrantly illegal aggression against the nation and people of Yemen, committing a laundry list of war crimes that the world has, by and large, completely ignored. But the Saudis may have to pay a price for this crime, a price far higher than they likely ever imagined.

The House of Saud may have control over the oil, and thereby control over the peninsula, but it is becoming increasingly clear that it does not have total control over its people. And, while no one knows whether a true general uprising in Saudi Arabia will come to pass, the war in Yemen might possibly be the spark that finally sets the oil drum ablaze.

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