# **Reassessing Gulf Security: The War in Yemen**

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## Introduction

Since the millennium, the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) comprising Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE have spent over $1 trillion on mostly high-end, western military equipment. On paper, this makes their military kit peerless in the Arab world. Nevertheless, the 2015 Saudi and UAE-led intervention in Yemen has taken policy and military officials and analysts by surprise. These states were expected to possess neither the capability or the skill nor the will to engage in as large, dangerous, and offensive a mission as the operation in Yemen. Therefore, these two factors—skill and will—need to be re-examined in order to understand the implications of the newly assertive Gulf military deployments.

The intervention in Yemen that started in March 2015 has ushered in a new era in the Gulf security discourse and, perhaps, praxis. Never before have any of the Gulf states so proactively, provocatively, and assertively deployed their military forces on such a scale and under GCC command. However, intense defense modernization in the previous decade as well joint military operations and recent small interventions, notably by the UAE, had paved the way for such developments.

A unique combination of factors, most notably the perception of the convergence of an unprecedented regional menace (Iran) and the rise of a hostile non-state actor on the Arabian Peninsula (the Houthis) as well as a sense of greater ownership of their own security at a time of US retrenchment, provided the impetus to intervene in Yemen. This intervention -- which relies heavily on air strikes as well as local proxy and allied forces -- has allowed these states to achieve significant though incomplete and possibly unsustainable military gains and register better-than-expected operational accomplishments. However, the overall performance of the Saudi and Emirati forces remains mixed because of the absence to date of political returns and controversial because of the heavy civilian toll. The still-unclear outcome of this intervention will likely weigh heavily on whether similar interventions will be conducted in the future in an increasingly volatile Middle East.

## All that glitters

The literature examining the militaries of the GCC is far from voluminous, but what there is raises serious questions about their performance. The critiques can be separated into two halves. One focuses on the lack of appropriate training, professionalism, and overall skills of the forces. The other questions the underlying raison d’etre and organization of these militaries as well as the rationales for acquiring expensive western military equipment.

The most exhaustive study of Arab militaries, *Arabs at War*, was conducted by Kenneth Pollack who sought to examine why “Since 1945 Arab states have experienced problems that have denied their armed forces the success on the battlefield that objective factors suggest should be within their grasp.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He concluded that “Four areas of military effectiveness stand out as consistent and crippling problems for Arab forces: poor tactical leadership, poor information management, poor weapons handling, and poor maintenance.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Tellingly and in part owing to the Gulf states’ young history, the only Gulf military covered in this study is that of Saudi Arabia and in just 22 pages.

Authors with vast experience in training missions throughout the Middle East draw similar conclusions. De Atkine argues that there are vast and fundamental culturally-based differences between western and Arab militaries. As such, the decades of western-led military training on western military kit has been – and will be – an exercise in ‘pounding square pegs into round holes’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Otherwise, critiques focus on inappropriate and un-rigorous training methodologies, culturally-based over-promotion of royal individuals, and the lack of a studiously military and institutional ethos.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In terms of the Gulf elite’s desire to use their forces, other critiques charge that armed forces are more about cultivating loyalty through patronage than being used as an actual military instrument.[[5]](#footnote-5) As a result, many Arab leaders purposefully designed, staffed and resourced their security and military apparatuses to balance praetorian guards and a national force, thus coup-proofing their regimes; external defense and power projection were just two of several, less important rationales underpinning security policy.[[6]](#footnote-6) In this context, massive arms procurement is cynically seen as a strategy to bankroll continuing western security commitment as well as a way for regimes to acquire and display prestige – the so-called ‘glitter factor’ – as opposed to meaningful methods to improve defense capabilities.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Yet such assumptions have been challenged by the 2015 Emirati and Saudi-led war in Yemen. This intervention has been of a scale and complexity that belie critiques that implicitly – or explicitly at times – charge that such warfare is beyond the capabilities of GCC states. The dangerous nature of the war, with GCC nationals being inserted into a deadly theatre of war and incurring significant casualties, further challenges existing conceptions of the built-in constraints on the role of the GCC militaries.

Though the policy community may have been surprised by the intervention, it did not emerge from a vacuum but followed a gradual defense build-up and escalation of the use of force by GCC states like Saudi Arabia and in particular the UAE.[[8]](#footnote-8) In recent decades under the leadership of Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and the Emirati president-in-waiting, the UAE has kept its military busy, deployed in numerous small training missions abroad and joint operations. These started with low-key participations in peacekeeping missions in the 1990s in east Africa and Kosovo and continued from 2008 with the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan.[[9]](#footnote-9) Joining the effort in Afghanistan was a significant step forward for the UAE. Though the deployment was small and the Emiratis did not take an aggressive front-line role, they provided niche capability in a hostile, internationalized, and politically important environment.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Emirati leadership sought to demonstrate their own strategic and operational utility as a small state, garner approval from crucial international allies, and harden and test in hostile conditions brigades of what would later become the elite UAE Presidential Guard. Throughout the 1990s and particularly from the 2000s onwards, the UAE also modernized its air force, procuring F-16s from the US more advanced than those operated by the US Air Force.[[11]](#footnote-11) With the UAE Air Force leading the way, thanks to its elite-led drive to develop the state’s military capabilities, the Emirati military developed an unrivaled reputation throughout the Gulf region.[[12]](#footnote-12) This military prowess was put on display during the 2011 NATO-led operation in Libya (Unified Protector), and with the coalition airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria starting 2014.[[13]](#footnote-13) The UAE also launched its own near-unilateral missions, attacking targets in Libya in 2015 and 2016 with limited Egyptian assistance.[[14]](#footnote-14) The signs of increasing military confidence and capacity were there.

In comparison, the Saudi military forces had considerably less experience. Though Saudi Arabia made an important contribution in Operations Desert Storm and Shield, this was mostly from a financial and political perspective.[[15]](#footnote-15) The overall state of readiness of the forces entering Operations Desert Shield and Storm was deeply lacking, particularly in the Saudi army that was highly understaffed and, ultimately, ‘only a small fraction [in the army] had any real degree of military professionalism and only two comparatively small mechanized infantry brigades had any real combat power.’[[16]](#footnote-16) The Saudi Arabian National Guard, a smaller praetorian force designed to balance the Army, played only a small role in the conflict. Much like the Army, it was far from covered in glory in the battle of Khafji, the key engagement often used by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to highlight their battle-proven skills during the conflict.[[17]](#footnote-17) The Saudi Air Force’s role in the operations was significant – clocking nearly 7,000 sorties, second only to the US in number – but pilots lacked suitable equipment and training for an offensive role, ultimately hampering their efficacy.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Saudi Arabia spent significantly on military procurement and training, but the 2009 border war with the Houthis strongly suggested that there remained ingrained organizational, doctrinal and operational problems with the Saudi forces. Despite its vast technological superiority and its alliance with the Yemeni government, Riyadh suffered significant setbacks and combat casualties against relatively poorly equipped but battle-hardened insurgents. Ultimately, the kingdom agreed to an unsatisfactory truce after the Houthis resisted months of Saudi air strikes and land incursions and infiltrated to the Saudi side of the border.[[19]](#footnote-19) In turn, the Yemeni government was unable to impose its control over the province or to reach a sustainable political solution, allowing the Houthi movement to grow even more in following years. That poor performance contributed to the sidelining of Prince Khaled bin Sultan al-Saud, who oversaw the campaign as assistant minister of defence. The health deterioration and eventual passing of his father Prince Sultan, the longtime defense minister, weak leadership in the ministry, allegations of corruption and a lack of vision had for long hindered defense modernization.

The silver-lining to the 2009 Yemeni debacle was that it galvanized momentum behind a major modernization project for the Saudi military. 2010 saw one of the largest military procurements in history, with up to $90 billion of new kit and upgrades being discussed as Saudi Arabia sought to revamp and rearm its forces.[[20]](#footnote-20) As well as kit, 2010 saw the replacement of Royal long-serving heads of Navy and Air Force with non-royals, a positive meritocratic sign at the top at least.[[21]](#footnote-21) Multinational exercises for all services were also increased to build up and harden Saudi forces.[[22]](#footnote-22)

## The road to Yemen: the decision to go to war

It is important to develop a rounded understanding of the Saudi and Emirati motivations that underpinned the unprecedented 2015 operation in Yemen. Thus far, explanations for the joint Saudi-Emirati decision to intervene have been overly simplistic. Commentary in the Arab media and government statements overemphasizes the pernicious influence of Iran expanding through the rebel Houthi movement.[[23]](#footnote-23) In turn, the narrative in western media and policy circles focuses overly on personalities at the expense of more structural factors.[[24]](#footnote-24) In particular, the ascendancy of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud in January 2015 and the simultaneous promotion of his ambitious son, Prince Mohammed bin Salman al-Saud, to Minister of Defence are treated as factors of immediate causation, not correlation.

In reality, Saudi Arabia has historically seen Yemen as a source of threat.[[25]](#footnote-25) The kingdom has alternated engagement, containment and intervention to face (and at times unwittingly exacerbate) ideological, territorial and other menaces, whether real or imagined. Yemen is seen as intimately connected to the security of the Arabian Peninsula, in part because of the dense transnational and tribal links among the various countries and in part because Yemen is resource-poor, populous, and politically different. As Gulf states fear, it is prone to exporting its own instability.

This difficult quest for stability and the cost of navigating Yemeni politics made them rely on Ali Abdallah Saleh, president of North Yemen since 1978 and later of unified Yemen from 1990 until 2012. Relations with Saleh amounted to an increasingly problematic entanglement: his corrupt and divisive governance and ambivalent campaign against the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – which Saudi Arabia and the UAE have long seen as a key security threat –worsened Yemen’s already considerable economic and social challenges.

Such fears peaked with the appearance of Ansar Allah, the Zaydi movement headed by the Houthi family that challenged Yemen’s central government since the mid-2000s and fought a border war in 2009 that humiliated the Saudi armed forces. Containing Houthi power became a driver of Gulf engagement in Yemen: the GCC designed and brokered the 2012 transition from Saleh to his vice president Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, hoping that other Yemeni factions and a complex political process would keep the Houthis in check. This context of Houthi ascendancy is key to understanding Saudi and Emirati perceptions: for Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, regional and local threats are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Thus the concomitant rise and exertion of regional influence by Ansar Allah and Iran in the past decade has particularly unnerved Gulf leaders who simplistically but nevertheless inextricably link such factors.

Emboldened by rhetorical as well as some material Iranian support, frustrated by what it perceived to be limited political gains made during political talks among Yemeni factions and distrustful of Gulf intentions, the Houthis pursued an ambitious path. They allied with their former foe Ali Abdallah Saleh, seized the capital Sana’a in September 2014 and ventured into often hostile territory (capturing the strategically-important Red Sea city of Hudeida, the country’s second biggest port), eventually taking parts of the key port city of Aden in early 2015. Within days of the Houthi takeover of the capital in September 2014, Iranian flights began to land in Sanaa, allegedly carrying Iranians advisers and weaponry.[[26]](#footnote-26) Bombastic declarations from Tehran that Iran now controlled four Arab capitals (Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and now Sanaa) were taken as literal policy statements and resonated powerfully in Gulf capitals.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Nevertheless, though the UN found that Iran had been supplying weapons and materiel to Ansar Allah since 2009, overall, the group does not fit the description of an organic Iranian proxy.[[28]](#footnote-28) Zaydism differs in many significant ways from Iran’s Twelver Shiism, Tehran has no decisive say over Houthi decisionmaking,[[29]](#footnote-29) and their recent relationship grew out of opportunism. It is doubtful that Iran ordered the Houthi power grab.[[30]](#footnote-30) Rather, once it happened, Tehran began to see Yemen as a battlefield where it could, with little effort, pin down and bleed Saudi Arabia as it focused on Iraq and Syria.

The Houthi southward expansion alienated significant segments of the Yemeni population beyond the weak and battered government of president Mansour Hadi: urban elites in Sana’a and Taizz, tribes in central Yemen, the tribal-Islamist coalition known as Islah, southern secessionists, and Saudi-allied Salafists. It also revitalized AQAP, which the Houthis had fought intensely even before they took over Sana’a in 2014. AQAP benefitted from the security vacuum as pro-Hadi forces battled the Houthis, from the disbanding of US-backed counter-terrorism units, from popular anti-Houthi sentiments among tribes from which AQAP recruits and from the Saudi-Emirati prioritization of the Houthi threat.

The Houthi territorial expansion, the attempted institutional takeover of the state and the rallying of significant, well-armed units of the military loyal to Saleh precipitated the joint Saudi-Emirati operation. Concerned by the collapse of the Arab order since 2011 and the perceived lack of a US will to preserve it and to counter perceived Iranian bellicosity, Saudi Arabia and the UAE became more aggressive in their foreign policies. As such, these states were never going to stand idly by and watch a group they consider a Yemeni Hezbollah-in-the-making institutionalise its power, dominate Yemeni politics, control vast and strategic territory (including the Bab Al-Mandeb strait), and acquire long-range missiles and an (arguably antiquated) air force. The apprehension in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that Ansar Allah would eventually morph into a Hezbollah on the south-eastern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, inviting ever-greater Iranian support and posing an ever-increasing threat to the kingdom and beyond, was not an unreasonable fear. Nevertheless, in their haste to counter this perceived, latent threat and to mobilize domestic and regional support, the Gulf states overemphasized the Iranian role, thereby removing almost all agency from the Houthis themselves and oversimplifying the dynamics of domestic Yemen politics. The policies that flowed from this assessment and the corresponding rules of engagement would serve to aggravate and entrench the conflict.

The Gulf-led intervention in Yemen occurred but a couple of months after King Salman ascended to the throne, and his hitherto untested son, Prince Mohammed, landed the Defence Ministry portfolio (among others). Given the importance of individuals in decision-making in Gulf politics, and the fact that it was such a profound break from the past in terms of ambition, risk and forces committed, it was understandably associated with King Salman and is likely to be his legacy as well as that of his ambitious son. However, the idea of and planning for an intervention in Yemen rose from the Houthi seizure of Sana’a and therefore predated his reign. Saudi Arabia suspended its financial aid as soon as the Houthis took over Sana’a and engaged in contingency planning. UAE leaders were from early on full partners in this effort, which gathered significant support within Gulf ruling circles. Indeed, for many Gulf officials, the mistake resided not in the fact that there was an intervention, but that it did not started earlier, before the Houthis expanded south towards Aden.

Though the nature and scale of the intervention might be reflective of particular leaders and their specific appetite for risk, the decision to intervene itself should be understood as more than just the rash decision-making of new, young and whimsical leaderships. Rather it was a near-inevitable, structural reaction in a volatile regional context that sharpened threat perceptions. Of particular importance to the decision-making in the run-up to and in the intervention itself was the nascent Emirati-Saudi axis in the Gulf region. Although the two countries had long been at odds on key matters, the erosion of the regional order and common enmity toward populist Islamism, an overly eager Qatar, and a rising Iran brought them closer. As the largest two economies and militaries of the Gulf, they had unmatched influence to set the regional agenda and pursue policies in tandem, making Yemen a test case.

## The War in Yemen

Examining the actions of the GCC states in Yemen is challenging because of the opacity of Gulf military decision making and operations as well as the scarcity of independent sources within Yemen. However, a critical mass of information can be gathered from a range of sources including UN reports, sporadic but detailed reportage from independent journalists on the ground, interviews with policy makers and advisers in the region, and informed commentary by experts with evident access to Gulf, UK, French, or US governments.

### Stand-off warfare

The Houthis marched on Aden on 22 March 2015, seizing the international airport and several outer neighborhoods. By this stage, Decisive Storm had been in the planning stages for some months.[[31]](#footnote-31) The Operation was launched on 25 March when the Houthis assaulted Taizz, Yemen’s third largest city. This allowed them to capture al-Anad air force base in the neighbouring Lahij province, the (now former) headquarters for US special operations combating al-Qaeda. The next day, Adel Jubeir, the then-Saudi ambassador in the US who soon after became foreign minister, announced the start of the bombing campaign from Washington. The choice of Washington foreshadowed the logistical support, expedited and newly-purchased weapons and ammunition deliveries, intelligence sharing and targeting assistance the US but also the UK and France would quickly provide to the coalition.

The stated objectives were to recapture the entirety of Yemen and destroy the Houthi movement, thus denying Iran a presence on the Arabian Peninsula. In private and as the fighting unfolded, the Gulf states formulated ambitions that were more realistic though still difficult to meet. They sought to defend Aden, roll back the Houthi expansion in southern and central areas and eventually put pressure on Sanaa, and neutralize the high-end military capabilities of Houthi-allied military units loyal to Saleh. Politically, the goal was to allow a semblance of Mansour Hadi authority out of Aden, break the Saleh-Houthi alliance and force the Houthis to return to the negotiating table in a weaker position. It became quickly clear that both countries would not mount a massive ground invasion but instead rely on overwhelming airpower, special forces, units from allied nations and local partners.

The first phase of the campaign included comprehensive air and naval blockades to ostensibly prevent weapons supplies to the Houthis alongside air strikes to destroy the Yemeni air and coastal defenses as well as air force and ballistic missile capabilities. The latter were seen as direct threats to Saudi territory and coalition assets.[[32]](#footnote-32) The meager air and naval capabilities of Houthi-Saleh forces could not compete with the clear superiority of the coalition (backed by US, UK and French vessels enforcing a UN arms embargo on the Houthis). Tellingly, there was no direct Iranian challenge to this blockade. Instead, Iran sent in May 2015 a ship supposedly carrying humanitarian supplies, which was unsurprisingly and peacefully prevented from reaching Yemeni shores. Such theatrics allowed Iran to appear to be taking the high ground while embarrassing Saudi Arabia at a time the humanitarian consequences of the blockade began unfolding.

Within 24 hours of the launch of ‘Decisive Storm,’ Saudi military spokesman Brigadier General Ahmed Asiri provided optimistic assessments of the campaign’s unfolding, claiming that coalition forces controlled the skies and had ‘devastated’ the Houthis ballistic missiles and command and control centres.[[33]](#footnote-33) In reality, satellite imagery showed that much of the Yemen air force and air defences remained untouched, while key runways were still usable. Of far greater concern was the enduring Houthi-Saleh capability to launch ballistic missiles mounted on mobile launchers difficult to hunt down, a fact that became egregiously apparent in subsequent months. In following months, pro-Houthi military units fired ballistic missiles that served as a humiliating reminder of Houthi resilience, forcing Saudi civilians alongside the border to seek shelter and the deployment of Saudi Patriot missile defense systems.

After destroying its initial list of military targets relatively quickly, the coalition widened its targeting scope by the second month, striking roads and fuel infrastructure to limit Houthi mobility.[[34]](#footnote-34) Despite announcing in late April the end to Operation Decisive Storm and issuing a proclamation of completed objectives, bombing continued and even intensified.

According to Knights and Mello, coalition targeting followed three patterns: coercive attacks against Houthi allies to compel them to separate from Ansar Allah, retaliatory attacks against Houthis, and continued Scud hunting.[[35]](#footnote-35) Though the air war was a key component in the coalition’s standoff approach, it came with serious costs. Figures and estimates of the collateral damage inflicted on Yemen vary, but numbers of civilian casualties are certainly in the thousands, while the wider humanitarian impact of accompanying food, water, and medicine shortages was acute. This led to widespread condemnation in international fora. Most sorties were flown by Saudi pilots which worsened collateral damage given that they typically dropped bombs from high altitude compared to more experienced Emirati pilots who conducted lower altitude bombings.[[36]](#footnote-36) While both Saudi Arabia and the UAE used precision weapons and benefitted from US and UK targeting support, there is also evidence of use of cluster bombs and targeting of civilian areas and medical infrastructure, which the coalition has either denied or blamed Houthi and Saleh mischief.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Coordination of air power was difficult with nine states operating eight different classes of fast-jets (F/A-18, F-15s, F-15c, F-16, Mirage 2000, Tornado IDS, Typhoon Eurofighter, and SU-24) all based in Saudi Arabia. This posed unparalleled logistical and operational challenges. Further complicating this is the role of UK and US advisors present in the coalition operation room advising in some oblique way on the targeting process. In addition, the US flew over seven hundred air-to-air refueling sorties given that the Arab states lack this key capability.[[38]](#footnote-38) The US has also been involved in search and rescue operations.[[39]](#footnote-39) The coordination of these multifarious, pan-national elements was technically impressive at times. And, like US commanders, analysts may need to recalibrate their expectations of the level of technical expertise that key states like the UAE can demonstrate in difficult, hostile circumstances.

On the ground, the advance of the coalition came with new problems. The deeper its troops advanced in Yemeni territory, the more exposed they and their supply lines were to attacks by Houthis and allied forces. Accordingly, September 2015 saw the worst loss of life in the Emirate’s military history. Over forty-five Emiratis, thirty-three Yemenis, and five Bahrainis were killed when a missile reportedly struck an arms cache stored in a coalition base. The UAE responded with three days of national mourning, and with a prolonged series of air raids on targets around Yemen. Such missile attacks continue to kill coalition troops sporadically. Such incidents include a strike that killed up to a dozen troops on 14 December, and another that killed one Emirati soldier in early February 2016. The next phase of the campaign focused on reconquering central areas, notably in the provinces of Maarib and Taiz to eventually close in on Sanaa.

Along the Saudi-Yemeni border, Scud missiles, rockets and artillery shells have continued to test Saudi defences.[[40]](#footnote-40) As in 2009, the Houthis mounted incursions from their heartland of Saada province, attacking Saudi border posts and posting footage online feature provocative statements such as “the Houthis are taking over Saudi Arabia.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Saudi soldiers have been killed in clashes near the Saudi city of Najran – a city of 1.6 million just 15km from the Yemeni border. Embarrassingly, this temporarily forced the Saudi national airline to suspend flights to the city and schools to close.[[42]](#footnote-42) By December 2015 the Economist recorded over 80 deaths from cross-border skirmishes and by February 375 Saudi civilians had been killed by Houthi rocket attacks in Najran.[[43]](#footnote-43) The symbolic nature of such strikes and operations on Saudi territory is noteworthy. Hitting inside Saudi Arabia is a sign of military resilience and commitment as well as a galvanizing tactic for the Houthis and many Yemenis who resent the Saudi intervention. And while the mountainous territory is advantageous for the Houthis and their guerilla-style attacks, it remains an embarrassment for Saudi Arabia to suffer quite so badly from such attacks.

Nevertheless, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE registered significant tactical and operational successes. Operation Golden Arrow, which wrestled Aden from Houthi control, demonstrated operational skill and audacity. A team of around fifty ship-deployed Special Forces composed of Yemenis serving in the UAE and Saudi forces alongside UAE Presidential Guard special forces landed in Crater, one of the coalition-controlled areas in Aden.[[44]](#footnote-44) The UAE request for US transportation support to land materiel in Aden was rebuffed, according to the New York Times, in part because the US did not think that the UAE possessed the capability to undertake such an amphibious landing.[[45]](#footnote-45) The UAE responded by purchasing its own transportation craft from an Australian company and proceed to successfully deploy approximately 25 per cent of the UAE’s Leclerc tanks and other armored vehicles.[[46]](#footnote-46)[[47]](#footnote-47) This success secured the port and airport of Aden, facilitating logistics and allowing the Hadi government to have an in-country base.

The aftermath of the operation of Aden also illustrated the coalition’s limitations. The low numbers of Saudi and Emirati troops and the reliance on local allies meant the crucial element of post-conflict stabilization was missing. Consequently, competition among the disparate local Yemeni factions escalated while security dramatically worsened in late 2015 and early 2016. This created a security vacuum that AQAP and ISIS sought to fill, which in turn complicated the goal of turning Aden into the base of the Hadi government. Indeed, the hotel at which government officials stayed was bombed. The coalition’s headquarters in Aden was also attacked in October 2015, forcing coalition troops to retrench even more.

Given the complex human terrain there and the size of the military undertaking, the coalition also struggled to help break the Houthi siege of Taizz. A city largely hostile to the Houthis, Taizz sits on the way from Aden to Sanaa. A failure to free Taiz would augur badly for a possible attack on the capital.

### Coalition Warfare

From the beginning, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were eager to obtain international support for the intervention, which was couched in the language and theater of international legitimacy. They sought to restore the internationally-recognized government and worked to secure UN resolution 2216 that banned arms supplies to the Houthis and Saleh. As importantly, they obtained Sunni legitimacy through the formation of a symbolic coalition of Sunni countries in a regional context of heightened sectarianism.

The coalition was made up of an impressive range of regional states, some of which contributed much needed forces, valuable support, and political cover. With the notable exception of Oman, which to the irritation of Saudi Arabia and the UAE chose to play the role of a neutral mediator, support from fellow Gulf states was forthcoming and highly publicized for local and international consumption. Reports indicated that Qatar sent as many as 1,000 of its troops, but the accuracy of these reports is questionable. Not only would 1,000 troops comprise approximately 10% of the state’s entire army – an unfeasibly large proportion of troops to project abroad – but the accompanying al-Jazeera report intimated that they were supported by 200 Qatari armoured vehicles and 30 Apache attack helicopters.[[48]](#footnote-48) As of the time of this writing, however, Qatar did not possess any Apaches (yet) and would likely struggle to deploy 200 armoured vehicles in one go.[[49]](#footnote-49) Bahrain and Kuwait have also deployed smaller numbers of troops to Yemen and to the Saudi side of the Yemeni border, respectively.[[50]](#footnote-50) Gulf participation served to sustain a narrative of solidarity and steadfastness, which helped to counter international skepticism and criticism of the operation.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi also enrolled support from other Sunni countries that contributed manpower. Such support is sometimes seen as payback for years of GCC financial aid as well as a guarantee of future assistance.[[51]](#footnote-51) On 4 May, the Senegalese foreign minister announced that his country would contribute 2,100 soldiers, for which Saudi Arabia would ‘pay Senegal a substantial sum.’[[52]](#footnote-52) Sudan deployed hundreds of special force soldiers to work with the coalition, most of which were deployed to secure Aden and its key infrastructure as Emirati special forces moved deeper into the country. Estimates of the Sudanese contribution range from 4,000 to 10,000 men.[[53]](#footnote-53) Eritrea leased its Hanish islands (strategically located only 29km from Yemen) as well as its port city of Assab to the UAE for thirty years for use against the Houthis as well as signing wider security and defence agreements. A UN monitoring mission later found that Eritrea has embedded 400 troops with Emirati forces – in contravention of existing UN resolutions on Eritrea – in return for financial compensation and oil.[[54]](#footnote-54) Djibouti is also negotiating the leasing of a military base to Saudi Arabia as of spring 2016 to further enable the encircling of Yemen.[[55]](#footnote-55)

But there were notable absentees too. Egypt provided ships for the naval blockade, but not the ground force that many in Saudi Arabia expected. This was a surprising rebuff for Saudi Arabia and the UAE given their staunch diplomatic and financial support of President Abdelfattah Sisi since 2013. More surprising still was the Pakistani refusal. Saudi-Pakistani relations have been exceedingly close for decades.[[56]](#footnote-56) Riyadh provided billions of dollars of aid to Pakistan. A very close security arrangement ties both countries, which included the deployment of 10,000 Pakistani troops to staff the Saudi 10th Armoured Brigade after the fundamentalist seizure of the mosque in Mecca in 1979, highlighting chronic weaknesses in Saudi capabilities.[[57]](#footnote-57) There was, from the Saudi side at least, an expectation that Pakistan would be a dependable ally and would deploy troops, repaying decades of Saudi support. But this was not the case. The Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, took the Saudi request to parliament, but it was rejected in April 2015.[[58]](#footnote-58) This rebuff provoked anger and embarrassment in Riyadh, and exposed Saudi diplomatic limitations.

Even then, the coalition assembled approximately 170 aircraft, the largest ever gathered in Arab history.[[59]](#footnote-59) Materially, the coalition provided welcome capabilities. For the air campaign, F-16s from Jordan (6), Egypt, Bahrain (6), Morocco (6), and the UAE (12) are based at Taif near Mecca and Kuwaiti F/A-18 Hornets (15), Qatari Mirage 2000s (10), and Sudanese Su-24s (3) are based at King Khalid airbase base in southwest Saudi Arabia.[[60]](#footnote-60) Saudi Arabia itself contributed approximately 100 planes (F-15c, F-15s, Tornado IDS, Typhoon, and support aircraft).

From the very beginning, and given the reluctance to conduct a massive ground operation, the coalition’s strategy emphasized the role of local allies in ground operations. A vast but diverse array of anti-Houthi local forces existed throughout southern Yemen, but securing their loyalty and aligning their interests and operations with those of the coalition (including a formal recognition of Hadi’s authority) proved arduous. Neither country had the experience and expertise of Iran in overseeing and directing the operations of local militias with a small cadre of highly skilled personnel.

Operating in Yemen exposed the two countries to difficult decisions about who to partner with. The risks of entanglement with unsavory or unreliable partners were substantial given the wide collection of Yemeni forces and the nature of the human terrain. The spectrum of possible partners ranged from southern secular secessionists and tribal elements to the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Islah and Salafist forces. A momentary convergence of interests even existed with the Houthi-hostile AQAP, though both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi considered the movement to be a threat to be addressed once the Houthis were rolled back. Nevertheless, while there is no evidence Saudi Arabia or the UAE actively conspired with AQAP, the latter benefitted from the chaos of the war which left vast swathes of south-east Yemen ungoverned for months on end.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Saudi Arabia took a pragmatic approach to alliances. Until early 2015, Saudi Arabia demonstrated a strong antipathy towards the Muslim Brotherhood, culminating with Saudi backing for the 2013 coup in Egypt and denunciation of the movement as a terrorist group in March 2014. King Salman toned down this uncompromising approach to the Brotherhood, allowing Riyadh to selectively engage MB affiliates on a local basis, notably in Yemen. Given that Yemeni personalities often uphold multiple affiliations, such flexibility was essential to build partnerships. The most prominent example is Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, a former military chief and a tribal leader with close links to al-Islah.[[62]](#footnote-62) Prompted by Saudi insistence, Mohsen provided political and military support to Hadi, and was rewarded with a powerful position, becoming Hadi’s vice-president in early 2016.

In contrast, UAE policy remained considerably more guarded and conditional toward potential Islamist allies in the region. Anwar Gargash, the minister of state for foreign affairs, best reflected the UAE’s antipathy towards al-Islah in an August 2015 tweet calling Islah “an opportunistic group… [that was] waiting for the chance to steal the achievements and lead the scene in Yemen.[[63]](#footnote-63) Emirati dilemmas came into focus during the battle over Taiz, where the UAE, in line with its stringent anti-Brotherhood worldview, originally demanded that local partners renounce their Islamist and al-Qaeda affiliations in return for support.[[64]](#footnote-64) The UAE’s consistently anti-Brotherhood policy was tempered for salient reasons. Firstly, Taiz is strategically located between Aden and Sana’a, the capital, and is also well placed as the gateway to the Bab al-Mandeb, one of the world’s key sealane choke-points. It is thus a critical part of any plan to control Yemen’s key cities. Secondly, the likes of Hammoud Saeed al-Mikhlafi, one of the strongest militia leaders in Yemen who is based in the pivotal city of Taiz, are first and foremost local commanders, resolutely focused on Taiz rather than dedicated to advancing a pan-regional Brotherhood alliance. He is also relatively moderate and could offer some assurances as to the limited nature of his political and military aspirations. Ultimately and no doubt prompted by its Saudi ally, the UAE proved to be relatively pragmatic: both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh gave support to Al-Mikhalfi.[[65]](#footnote-65) Another example of an important UAE- and Saudi-backed tribal leader is Shaikh Mansour al-Khanqu who is also affiliated to Islah.[[66]](#footnote-66) The UN found that Salafi groups grew in Taiz countering the Houthi threat and received some support from the coalition too.[[67]](#footnote-67)

In the Hadhramaut region in the belated fight against al-Qaeda’s gains, the UAE strove to recruit, train, and deploy local forces formed into first and second Military Regional Commands, coopt existing fighting groups like the Hadhramaut Tribal Confederation, and forge an alliance with ‘a patchwork of nearly 4,000 tribal rebels.’[[68]](#footnote-68) Knights notes that the approach was different in Aden, where fighters were added to regular Yemeni Army units. In both of these instances, the UAE mobilised Yemeni tribes that moved to the Gulf States in the 1960s and 1970s, some of which took Gulf nationalities and joined the armed forces while retaining links to Yemen.[[69]](#footnote-69) The UAE also sought to quickly train up local forces, which included training Yemeni pilots at al-Anad air base and furnishing them with IOMAX AT-802 light strike aircraft ideal for close air support of ground troops and an army and police-led focus on training with Yemeni ground forces.[[70]](#footnote-70) And further complicating the UAE’s mélange of actors working on its behalf in Yemen were the hundreds of South American mercenaries, based from Abu Dhabi, who were also deployed to Yemen.[[71]](#footnote-71)

UAE forces worked alongside these forces as well as directing them. The Emirati Presidential Guard played a conspicuous role in Operation Golden Arrow alongside Yemenis trained in the UAE and the Saudi armed forces.[[72]](#footnote-72) Nor was this modus operandi isolated to the battle for Aden. The presence of special forces (usually Emirati) or Yemeni troops in the direct contact with the Houthis is a trope evidenced throughout the conflict to date, as opposed to wider ‘front lines’ of regular coalition troops facing up to the Houthis. For example, the subsequent battle for al-Anad air base was led by a 1500-man UAE-trained and equipped Yemeni force.[[73]](#footnote-73)

## Assessments & Implications

The very fact that the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia and the UAE built and led such a large and complex coalition to launch such a far-reaching war with such ambitious objectives, challenges existing ideas of the utility of military forces for the Gulf states. Equally, some of the operational vignettes emerging from the war – the Aden amphibious landing, some of the logistical work supporting the air war and the Emirati-led effort to expel AQAP from the port city of Mukalla in the southeastern province of Hadramawt – also contradicted mainstream understandings about the levels of competence of the region’s military forces. Nevertheless, this assessment ultimately suggests that the paradigm has not shifted; rather, it has been slightly nudged.

**Adjusting to the war’s realities and politics**

The initial grandiose tasks that the coalition set, including rolling back of Houthi influence across the country, recovering the capital and restoring the Hadi government, were wildly implausible and remain so. Even the subsequently more limited aims to undercut Houthi power and create rifts in the Houthi-Saleh alliance in order to force them to the negotiating table in a weaker position proved difficult to achieve.

Indeed, Saudi Arabia and the UAE struggled to translate military gains into actionable political leverage during the talks conveyed by the UN in the spring and summer of 2016, in part because the political and military tracks appeared disconnected and in part because of the complexity of the Yemeni situation, which at times seemed to bedazzle them.

Whether prompted by the US or the UN or driven by its own considerations, the coalition sought to create political momentum for talks, announcing military and political de-escalation measures including ceasefires. For example, in what was widely interpreted as a conciliatory gesture, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir tweeted in May 2016: “Al-Qaeda and ISIS are terrorist organizations. However, the Houthis are Yemenis and are our neighbors with whom one can hold talks. Whether we disagree or agree with the Houthis, they remain a part of the social fabric of Yemen.”[[74]](#footnote-74) Privately, Saudi officials also recognized the need to compromise (including on the departure of Hadi during the transition) but seemed unable to get their Yemeni allies to align and organize accordingly.

Embarrassingly, the coalition’s relative successes did not induce greater cohesion or inject a sense of purpose among the array of anti-Houthi Yemeni actors. The enduring insecurity in Aden meant that the coalition-supported president Hadi chose to stay in a safe palace in Saudi Arabia, paying sparse visits to liberated areas. This undermined his already-dented credibility and authority. Political infighting between Hadi and other Saudi- and Emirati-backed politicians was also problematic: resenting his vice president Khaled Bahah’s popularity and fearing that Bahah could supplant him as part of a settlement, Hadi unexpectedly replaced him with Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar in April 2016. Such competing aims and loyalties among Yemenis fueled brinksmanship and intransigence, especially on the part of Hadi, and undermined his claim to be able to reach and implement a settlement.

In contrast, the Houthi-Saleh axis proved solid and coherent. Existing tensions between Ansar Allah and Saleh, long sworn enemies, remained contained, and while the Saleh camp suffered from some defections, his tribal allies and much of the military units loyal to him resisted coalition entreaties and absorbed the cost of war. Despite discontent over the humanitarian cost of the war and their own abuses, there was no discernible loss of popular support for both. Public rallies in Sanaa and elsewhere continued to gather large crowds.

Facing a serious military challenge, Saudi Arabia and the UAE realized that they could not hope to achieve their aims and objectives on their own and within the parameters they had established. Rosy military assessments and repeated announcements of a coming final push toward Sana’a were belied by the coalition’s travails in Taizz and elsewhere. The growth of ISIS but more importantly AQAP was both a threat and an embarrassment, forcing the two governments to divert attention and resources to counter them.

**Coalition and Strategy**

The assembly of the coalition of the willing was relatively successful, notwithstanding the disappointments of Pakistan and Egypt. The air power coalition in particular was successful, and the states overcame chronic logistical difficulties in Saudi Arabia to organize and sustain such a bombing campaign.

Politically, despite the ramshackle and ad hoc way that the coalition was put together, with vanishingly little coordination or explanation as to the short, medium or long term plans or implications of joining the coalition, it suffered no defection over the conduct of the war, as Saudi Arabia in particular absorbed the reputational and associated costs. There were few public signs of discontent among core coalition members, and while countries did adjust their deployments, this cannot necessarily be blamed on inter-coalition tensions but rather on operational requirements.

Pressing as the Houthi concern was viewed, it was not grave enough to compel the states to engage in ‘total war’. The habitual Gulf intolerance for casualties remained. The September 2015 strike that killed dozens of Emiratis was, after all, the result of a fluke of a missile hitting its mark, not because the coalition engaged in an overly risky tactical venture. And in the aftermath of the strike, Emirati leaders paid visits to each grieving family in part to contain shock and discontent.

This concern about casualties shaped rules of engagement and underpinned the wider strategy: first, conduct the war through proxy forces as much as possible, and, second, conduct the war from afar, limiting the manifest dangers from the Houthis to a minimum. However, it is likely that the Saudis expected to rely heavily on Pakistani ground troops. Their absence forced the coalition to look for replacement troops, which came from Sudan and other countries. This search was made easier because of the relative low quality and cost of such troops, and the minimal political costs for contributing nations. But it demonstrated the haphazard approach to military strategy once the basic preferences were articulated.

**Operations**

Within the coalition, the key dynamic was evidently between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. However strategically close the two had become, they had different military cultures. Importantly, there was a gap in expeditionary experience, capability and combat-readiness. The UAE deployed considerably better-trained and nimble forces and superior logistical capabilities that had a quick enabling effect on Yemeni partners. However, whatever Saudi Arabia lacked militarily, it made up in size, influence and seniority. While operational and political differences certainly existed, UAE deference to the Saudi leadership was unmistakable.

However capable the UAE in particular proved, sustaining the deployment quickly became an issue. The UAE struggled to maintain a sufficient level of force and the associated pace of troop rotations as missions accumulated (stabilization of Aden, fight against AQAP in Mukalla). Soldiers were soon rotated out of Yemen, though replacement levels seemed to dwindle, indicating fatigue, paucity of suitable troops but possibly also misgivings among the leadership.

Another source of frustration for the coalition was the under-development of unified GCC military structures despite decades of rhetorical support for GCC military integration. While Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar all contributed troops, it was up to the coalition to organize their deployments on a largely ad hoc basis.

Operationally, Saudi Arabia and the UAE found themselves facing a chronic shortage of infantry. They used their Special Forces and mercenaries sparingly, and typically only in stand-alone, choreographed operations rather than as part of continuous ground operations or in front-line fighting. In lieu of a cohesive coalition, Saudi and UAE forces had to do more of the heavy-lifting themselves. This highlighted traditional weaknesses in the Saudi military.

A particular Saudi weakness was revealed by the intensity of the cross-border fighting. Saudi border defense was, once again, sorely lacking. This inhospitable, mountainous terrain along the border allowed the low-tech Houthi insurgent approach to negate the advantages inherent for the more technologically advanced Saudi military. Even then, judging by Saudi military and civilian casualties, the scarring lessons of the 2009 war were not apparent.

Sudanese soldiers helped to guard the airport in Aden, which was useful, but still the coalition lacked offensive soldiers to take the battle to the Houthis. This left a reliance on hastily assembled locally recruited and trained coalitions (e.g. in Aden) or the simple temporary ‘leasing’ of fighting groups for the coalition’s aims (e.g. in Mukalla). Ultimately, this approach proved to be costly and unsustainable.

**Local knowledge**

The weak Saudi performance was due in part to declining knowledge about Yemen. For years, the Saudi pointman on Yemen was Prince Sultan, who oversaw Saudi activities and patronage there. His declining health and death in 2011 meant the Saudi system lacked a unified, comprehensive and hands-on approach to Yemen. The threat of AQAP compelled the intelligence branch of the Ministry of Interior (Mabahith), elevating Prince Mohammed bin Naef to the most prominent role, but this was a uni-dimensional, AQAP-focused approach. When protests shook Sana’a in 2011, Saudi Arabia boosted the role of the GCC instead of intervening directly in the crisis. Prince Naef, who since has become the Crown Prince, is however rumored to be skeptical about the Yemen operation.

As the war unfolded, the coalition’s frustration grew with the realization that muscle and cash do not necessarily translate into sustainable leverage over their partners and do not override the preferences of local actors. It is tempting to conclude that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have a lot to learn from Iran in their remote control of proxy forces in foreign lands. However, and for a host of reasons, these countries lack a defense doctrine that prioritizes asymmetric warfare and investment in proxies.

**International support**

The ambivalent US support for the coalition played an enabling role in the whole venture without which the entire campaign would have necessarily been smaller in scale. A reluctant US administration had consented to the operations in a complex context. US President Barack Obama had prioritized a nuclear agreement with Tehran and publicly pledged to contain Iran’s actions in the region. Winning Saudi and Emirati consent or at least non-obstruction of the deal meant accepting an operation widely viewed as unwise or even unfounded in Washington.

As a result, the US provided intelligence, targeting advice, logistical support, air-to-air refueling, expedited munitions resupply and maintenance that were key to the coalition’s operations. While Washington saw this assistance as necessary to maintain the relationship and to influence coalition military behavior, it made the US a de facto partner of the war effort and liable for resulting collateral damage and other abuses, thus vulnerable to public criticism.

The subsequent outcry on Capitol Hill, the European Parliament and elsewhere about US but also UK logistical support and arms deliveries to countries accused of trampling international humanitarian law and deliberately targeting civilians could have long-term consequences on the capacity of the Gulf states to resource operations. Calls in the US and the EU to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia have intensified and illustrated the Gulf dependency on western military suppliers.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the coalition’s way of war has proven to be flawed. While the will to intervene has been demonstrated, it remains too early to determine if the will to sustain and calibrate the operation to a successful end exists. Importantly, the coalition has not found a new formula with which to achieve operational aims while minimizing exposure. By mid-2016, force had compelled the Houthis to sit at the negotiating table, but not to agree on a political settlement. The cost, however, has been massive. It is difficult to presently evaluate the financial and other costs to the coalition, but it runs in the billions of dollars monthly.

But it is the Yemeni people, including the Houthis, their supporters and opponents, who have borne the lion’s share of that cost. Indeed, damage to infrastructure has been massive in scale and impact. The chosen over reliance on airstrikes, for example, has led to an egregious level of civilian deaths and destruction of infrastructure as fewer and fewer military targets were available, yet the coalition pressed on with an air power-led coercion campaign. A functioning post-conflict Yemeni state is probably unattainable regardless of the levels of financial support for reconstruction.

The coalition’s relatively light footprint meant that post-conflict stabilization was poorly-resourced, if considered at all; it also guaranteed that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE would face complex decisions and uncomfortable entanglements with opportunistic and unreliable local factions and politicians. Indeed, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi experienced firsthand the dictum that no battle plan ever survives contact with the enemy.

For the two leaders of the coalition, a plausible outcome is a failed state at their border, where the Houthis survive as a key military actor dominating vast territory and where the conditions for radicalization and jihadi recruitment are ideal.

If the main Gulf states clearly demonstrated their readiness to deploy force against perceived threats in proximate territory, sending powerful messages to their partners and foes, the still-uncertain outcome of the campaign will have significant implications for future similar scenarios. The Yemen campaign is at most a model for limited intervention in weak countries, not a template of strategic and defense self-sufficiency or for how future inter-state wars could unfold in the Gulf region.

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