From Money to Guns: Explaining Saudi Arabia’s Decision-Making in Operation Decisive Storm

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Abstract

This article explores one of the most understudied conflicts in the Middle East currently, the Saudi Arabian-led campaign against Yemen. With the conflagrations in Iraq and Syria occupying news headlines, the few pieces of analysis looking at Operation Restore Hope explains the campaign as simply the extension of a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, a deeper explanation is much more complex and points to changes in Saudi Arabia, the region, and the international system. This paper specifically seeks to explain how Saudi Arabia’s long-standing, conservatively-oriented foreign policy towards Yemen transformed into an aggressive and militarized policy. Following this goal, I first provide a theoretical understanding of foreign policy making, while highlighting the historical development of Saudi foreign policy in Yemen. Secondly, I elucidate changes at the domestic, regional, and international level that led Saudi policy makers to alter their
foreign policy approach. Third, I look at the potential effects the failed Yemen campaign may have on Muhammad bin Salman tenure and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the changes ushered in with the Trump administration. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the importance of leaders’ perceptions in highly centralized states, and the limits of the sectarian narrative. By doing so, I provide insights for viewing the New Arab Cold War in the Middle East in a more thorough and analytically rigorous manner.

Over the course of Operation Decisive Storm and the subsequently-named Restore Hope, informed journalists and academics alike explained the war in Yemen as an outgrowth of a proxy battle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. On the surface, this explanation seems both logical and useful for the Saudi coalition. The explicit sectarianism that has dominated the Middle East since the 2003 Iraq war, and accelerated with the Arab Uprisings, is a helpful tool to employ as the wealthiest state in the region bombs the poorest state, while enforcing a devastating naval and air blockade of the country. The humanitarian costs of the war are staggering: the UN categorized Yemen as the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, which sees more than two-thirds of the population in need of assistance, while a third (7 million people) face the specter of famine. However, if the war is able to prevent the spread of Shi’ism in the region, the largely Sunni Arab states of the Middle East could turn a blind eye to the conflict. This explanation, however, is analytically insufficient.

Every aspect of the war has been under-reported (not least of which is the humanitarian catastrophe), primarily being overshadowed by the Syria conflagration. Perhaps this is why the popular narrative has stood for well over a year. However, this narrative explains only a very small part of the conflict. More interesting is, how did a conservatively oriented Saudi foreign policy morph into an aggressive, militarized foreign policy in Yemen? This aggressiveness is marked by the direct employment of Saudi armed forces on the ground in Yemen. Such actions are unique in the long history of Saudi policy, which was built on the use of proxies, money, and at most, the sporadic use of Saudi’s Air Force. The following seeks to explain this puzzle. The first section provides a theoretical understanding of foreign policy and decision-making, highlighting the historical development of Saudi foreign policy in Yemen. The second section details changes at the domestic, regional, and international level that led Saudi decision-makers to alter their foreign policy approach. This section suggests the domestic changes after the ascension of King Salman played a prominent role in this shift. The third section looks at the potential effects the failed Yemen campaign may have on Muhammad bin Salman and the Kingdom, while also detailing the effects of the Trump administration on the war. Finally, the conclusion highlights the importance of leaders’ perceptions in highly centralized states. Importantly, this section also emphasizes the limits of the sectarian narrative by suggesting a move from the view of sectarianism as a determinate, to sectarianism as an instrument. In short, a rhetorical device overlaying deeper material and power considerations.

Saudi Arabia’s Traditional Policy in Yemen

Foreign policy decisions are the product of two factors. First, are structures which include outside actors (like public opinion), the economic and business class, and the national security bureaucracies. For Saudi Arabia specifically, the national security bureaucracy is the most important structure. It is also a highly-centralized structure, essentially the only structure of consequence. Second, are determinates (interests and challenges), which are broken down into the international, regional, and domestic level, and are a product of historical decision-making. Policy-makers respond to interests and challenges by ‘filtering’ them through the state’s structures to reach to a policy outcome.3

Despite the realist assumption that actors are rational, weighing the cost and benefit of each action, interests and threats are constructed and shaped by state identity and its historic foreign policy role.4 The established foreign policy role then positions the state towards its neighbors, the regional system, and great powers. Over time, the structures are socialized into the next generation of policymakers, setting standards of legitimacy and performance.5 This is certainly true for Saudi Arabia. In Gause’s book Saudi-Yemeni Relations, he highlights the two major factors shaping modern Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy: first, its historical decision-making; and second, its internal policy-making dynamics.6

Saudi Arabia’s policy role in Yemen has been shaped through state formation, which became socialized inside the ruling royal family, and later institutionalized into the national security structure. One of Saudi Arabia’s earliest wars was with its southern neighbor over the delineation of their shared border. King ‘Abd al-'Aziz ibn Sa’ud entrusted Princes Faysal and Sa’ud (both subsequently kings) to liberate/conquer Najran, a southern province that was Yemeni controlled.7 They were successful. In 1934, Imam Yahya Hamid al-Din (then ruler of Yemen) was forced to sign the Ta’if Treaty, surrendering the Yemeni provinces of Asir, Jizan, and Najran to Saudi Arabia. The treaty had a catch: it must be renewed every 20 years.8 Due to this odd clause, Ibn Sa’ud advised his sons that Yemen is a threat and warned “the good or evil for us will come from Yemen...keep it weak and divided.”9 Indeed, until Yemen and Saudi Arabia permanently resolved their border disagreement in 2000, Riyadh sought to maintain a weak regime in Sana’a to retain their advantage in the renegotiations of the Ta’if Treaty.10

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10 Stenslie, “Not Too Strong, Not Too Weak.”
Throughout the years, from 1934 until the border dispute was permanently resolved in 2000, Saudi policy followed this strategy. They opposed unification, and when it occurred in 1990, they sought influence by buying off Yemeni tribesmen, politicians, and generals. Prince Sultan, the late defense minister, institutionalized this policy by founding and directing the Special Office for Yemen Affairs. The small office, which resembled more of a royal committee, cultivated a wide network of contacts, informants, and influencers in Yemen. The committee had a yearly operating budget of $3.5 billion which they used to provide thousands of Yemenis stipends including tribal sheikhs, religious leaders, politicians, and military officers. This policy tacitly (although it was well-known) viewed democratization and populism in Yemen as a direct threat to Saudi Arabia that must be undermined. The goal was to actively repress forces that posed a risk to the status quo, thereby maintaining continuity of authoritarian governance in Yemen. The key policy objective was simple, “prevent hostile foreign powers – and ideologies such as republicanism and Shi’a revivalism – from gaining a foothold on their southern doorstep.” In this sense, the Houthis were not much different from previous revolutionaries that threatened the Kingdom. Therefore, Saudi policy immediately after the Arab Spring and the fall of President Salih followed this policy that they built over the decades.

This policy changed in 2015. A former minister from the Middle East commented, “In the past the Saudis generally tried to keep their options open and were cautious, even when they were trying to get rid of some government they did not like.” This time they did not; instead of following the model of the New Arab Cold War of channeling weapons to rival groups involved in internal (civil) wars, the Saudis pursued a direct war with the Houthis. Following the Houthi takeover of Sana’a in September 2014, their consolidation of rule in the capital in January 2015, and then their moves in March south towards Aden (the last stronghold of President Hadi), the Saudis built a coalition and began operation “Decisive Storm.”

The question then arises, why did Saudi Arabia turn its back on their traditionally conservative foreign policy, for direct military intervention in Yemen? The campaign to drive the Houthis back to the north and forcing them to the negotiating table signified a substantial departure from Saudi Arabia’s typical “behind-the-scenes, quiet diplomacy.”

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11 Ibid.
13 Stenslie, “Not Too Strong, Not Too Weak.”
14 Ibid.
16 Hinnebusch, *The International Politics of the Middle East*, 292.
Decision-Making Pre-War: Challenges, Interests, and Opportunities

Saudi Arabia’s decision to move from the status quo is the result of domestic, regional, and international changes, which are only partly accounted for in the popular representation of the Yemen war as a regional proxy war between Saudi and Iran. The “sibling shuffle” instituted by King Salman following his ascension to the throne in January 2015 was perhaps the most influential structural change that lead to the foreign policy shift. By empowering Muhammad bin Nayif and Muhammad bin Salman, King Salman cut out numerous older cousins and thereby centralized power in his hands.18 Domestically, a war against the Houthis would promote and consolidate bin Salman (his son and current Minister of Defense) in the Saudi power structure. The war, the King hoped, would also create a “rally-around-the-flag” effect, directing attention away from the endemic domestic problems the Kingdom faced. Regionally, the war was a bid by the Saudis to move to a role of prominence and hegemony in the region. Finally, in light of perceived US disengagement from the region, the war would demonstrate that Saudi could defend their core interests without US help.

Domestic

The fundamental shift that occurred with King Salman and the sibling shuffle is unprecedented. By empowering the younger generation, the traditional approach advocated for by veteran Foreign Minister Sa’ud al-Faysal and others lost its influence.19 As described above, this goes against the historical trend of decision-making. As Hinnebusch points out, “In Saudi Arabia, foreign policy decisions are taken consensually by the King and senior princes of the royal family, producing caution and continuity in policy.”20 The resulting policies are thus risk averse. This is precisely what the younger generation was lobbying against. As a longtime Saudi watcher commented, “There is a new leadership coming about in Saudi Arabia, especially a younger generation of Saudi leaders who no longer have the reticence that perhaps their fathers, their uncles, their cousins may have had. These young people are sure of themselves.”21

While the resultant foreign policy was partially the result of this generational divide between the younger princes pushing for a more active foreign policy against the traditional, older conservatives, it is also the result of a familial/institutional split between bin Salman and bin Nayif. As Minister of Interior, bin Nayif controlled the strongest and most influential forces within the Kingdom. These include the Saudi Royal Guard Regiment – responsible for the royal family’s security and thus close to power – the Saudi Arabian National Guard, and other paramilitary groups

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20 Hinnebusch, The International Politics of the Middle East, 146.
to provide overlapping security. The historical development of Saudi Arabia and its military in the context of regional military coups, encouraged by Nasserite-inspired ‘Free Officers,’ led the al-Sa’ud family to hamstring the Ministry of Defense and keep the military far away from Riyadh and the centers of power. Therefore, bin Salman’s position as Minister of Defense placed him beneath bin Nayif in the power structure. The thought followed that a strong showing of the military in Yemen would also be viewed as a victory for bin Salman, upgrading the young prince’s respect in the establishment, demonstrating his leadership capabilities, and allowing him to reach or exceed power parity with his older cousin Muhammad bin Nayif. As one diplomat commented, “[bin Salman] was eager to try out his expensive new weapons. He could crush the Houthis with a quick campaign and thereby shore up his own position at the expense of potential rivals in the ruling family.”

The war against Yemen could also have the tertiary benefit of proving to the Saudi populace that the massive investment in the military could have profitable returns, while at same time redirecting attention away from domestic ills and rally the population around the flag and monarchy. Stenslie points out “the fear of the Iranian threat, coupled with Wahhabi Islam’s deep-rooted Shia phobia, is one of the few issues having the potential to unite broad segments of the Saudi population.” The war against Yemen would be a message to the public in Saudi Arabia that the billions spent on personnel, weapons, and training are paying dividends. The Saudis have constantly been at the top of the list of spenders on the military, and it is reasonable to assume they wanted to gain some practice in actually using the equipment and acquire operational experience.

As the Saudi population copes with low oil prices, reduced subsidies, and unemployment concentrating negative energies outwards, instead of inwards could buy the monarchy some praise and more importantly time. Certainly, the leadership likely calculated that the war would get Saudis to rally around the monarchy. The immediate results were positive. Saudi Twitter users praised the war with nationalistic tweets, national newspapers ran op-eds supporting the action, and pictures abounded of bin Salman on the front-lines, in the “war room,” and visiting injured soldiers. In sum, the decision to bomb Yemen served multiple domestic policy imperatives, and promised to achieve domestic political aspirations.

**Regional**

The sibling shuffle and the new foreign policy are directly tied to the fundamental shifts in regional relations that resulted from the 2003 Iraq war and which consolidated after the Arab Spring.

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23 Stenslie, “‘Decisive Storm.’”
26 Nazer, “A More Assertive Regional Role.”
27 Stenslie, “‘Decisive Storm.’”
28 Ibid.
This policy sought to capitalize on the shifting regional balance of power as traditionally strong states were weakened and Saudi was strengthened. Not only were Egypt and Syria, the two former major regional powers consigned to becoming main prizes in the post-uprising battleground, but lesser prizes arose included Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen. Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia were the three states with enough power and resources, and which escaped relatively unscathed from the Uprisings that could shape the post-uprising order. Iran constituted one axis, and Saudi Arabia hoped to lead the other. If Saudi could achieve a rapid military victory in Yemen and prove their ability to confront Iran, then other Sunni states would fall in line behind Saudi leadership and thereby establish King Salman’s hegemony in the Sunni Muslim World.

Initially, the Arab Spring seemed to weaken Iran. First, they were still trying to deal with the aftermath of the Green Revolution, which combined with crippling sanctions, left domestic politics in turmoil. Second, Hamas broke from the Iranian-axis. This was an immense ideological loss, as Hamas was the only Sunni group backing Iran and therefore the universal “Islamic uprising/awakening” was now split down sectarian lines. Finally, by mid-2013 Iran seemed to be on the brink of losing Syria, their most important regional partner. The loss of Syria would be a massive blow to Iran, and the simultaneous decline of Hezbollah posed an ominous future for Iran. However, as the Arab Spring progressed, Iranian losses were reversed. Hezbollah intervened in Syria and proved their worth. The situation in Syria stabilized, and then Assad went on the offensive. In Iraq, Shi’a Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Sha’bi) linked to Iran proved resilient and competent fighters. Finally, Iran concluded a nuclear agreement with the US, which represented a genuine, high-stakes turning point in the regional order. The Saudis saw Iran behind every regional set-back and concluded Iranian gains had to be halted and reversed.

With the Houthis on the move, supported at least rhetorically by Iran, the decision to act and inflict and swift military victory over Iranian proxies could make up for losses elsewhere. Certainly, to some extent, the Yemen campaign was aimed at restoring “[honor] after the humiliation of the ‘defeat’ against the Assad regime and Iran in Syria.” Such a show of force and decisiveness would be a “warning to Iran to stop its encroachment on what is traditionally considered Saudi Arabia’s ‘backyard’ of Yemen specifically, and what Saudi officials have repeatedly characterized as Iran’s ‘meddling’ in Arab affairs in general.”

29 Rogers, Joshua. “Yemen’s First Civil War Offers Lessons for Ending the Country’s Current Conflict.” Muftah. 21 April 2015. Online
30 Hinnebusch, The International Politics of the Middle East, 277.
31 Ibid, 277.
32 Stenslie, “Decisive Storm.”
33 Hinnebusch, The International Politics of the Middle East, 278.
35 Stenslie, “Decisive Storm.”
36 Nazer, “A More Assertive Regional Role.”
Finally, the international milieu provided a permissive environment for Saudi adventurism. The US response to the Arab Uprisings was confused and wavering. The further erosion of the norm of Arab non-intervention in Arab states after the Arab League signed onto the Libya intervention, the continually-devolving morass and international attention on Syria, and the US focus on Iraq and ISIL provided an opening for Saudi to act in Yemen. While the US is an indispensable source of many material and diplomatic resources, there are constraints placed on accepting states for this support. However, it is increasingly unclear how far the US is willing to go to restrain regional powers’ autonomy.\footnote{Hinnebusch, \textit{The International Politics of the Middle East}, 107.} Saudi Arabia’s entry into Yemen challenged previous US constraints on action, and was a clear signal by the Saudi leadership to the US. That is to say, although Saudi Arabia still considers the United States a valuable partner, going forward, it will take whatever measures are necessary to defend its national security— with minimal consultation if necessary— should the US or the international community demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to do so.\footnote{Nazer, “A More Assertive Regional Role.”}

In fact, Nawaf Obaid, a close advisor to the royal family, states that “Obama abandoned the Arab world. Riyadh is picking up the slack.”\footnote{Obaid, Nawaf. “The Salman Doctrine: the Saudi Reply to Obama’s Weakness.” \textit{The National Interest}. 30 March 2016. Online.} Obaid goes on to say that the “Salman Doctrine” (the new, aggressive foreign policy) emerged from the necessity of Saudi pursuing self-help facing a withdrawal of American leadership in the region, energized by a need to confront Iran, and is backed up by transformational changes in Saudi’s military, public policy, and alliance system.\footnote{Ibid.} In short, all of the international, regional, and domestic transformations mentioned above.

**Effects on Decision-making Structure after the Yemen Campaign**

The new “Salman Doctrine” promised a great reward for bin Salman and King Salman. However, it also entailed great risk. As one long-time Saudi watcher commented, “Of course this [the Yemen war] is a test…If the Saudi leadership can demonstrate that in fact they are up to the job, if they can really assume the mantle of leadership then we will see their power increase dramatically and substantially.”\footnote{SUSRIS, “FocusKSA | Intervention in Yemen.”} It is clear that they failed the test. With the regional dynamics essentially unchanged, and an unknown international environment, it is unclear whether the domestic structure under King Salman will persist or if a return to a more traditional approach to their foreign policy will occur. Whispered letters of discontent may suggest a return to the cautious approach. However, pressure on the Kingdom and their ill-fated war may be eased by the Trump administration.

In September 2015, 6-months into the Yemen campaign, a senior prince (reportedly a
grandson of Ibn Sa’ud) circulated two letters to his relatives expressing fears about the regime’s security if King Salman remained on the throne. bin Salman, referred to as ‘the boy,’ was criticized for being arrogant, reckless, and lacking a proper exit strategy. Domestic support is also fading. The nationalistic tweets have ceased. Religious leaders that supported the intervention are now facing pressure for their stances as the humanitarian crises balloons and the public profile of bin Salman has shrunk.42

bin Salman is in a tough position. The perception of losing the war is an existential threat to his, and King Salman’s power and position.43 The 2009 bombing campaign in northern Yemen, roundly seen as a failure by the military and which led to the disgrace of then Minister of Defense Khaled bin Sultan, must be in the forefront of bin Salman’s mind.44 There is speculation that a similar embarrassment could lead to a palace-coup in Riyadh, although that may be overstated.45 At the same time, the longer the war drags on, the more political risk accumulates and the greater the possibility that Yemen devolves completely into a failed state. This would be considered an enormous strategic failure and conundrum for the Saudis. State collapse could lead to a swell in refugees crossing into Saudi Arabia and an uptick in crime in the southern provinces, predominantly in the form of smuggling. Perhaps most worryingly, it could provide an opportunity to Iran to continue to poke Saudi Arabia in the eye from Saudi’s own backyard.46

Internationally, the US was, under Obama sending strong signals to Riyadh to reign in its bombing campaign or at least be more accurate with their bombs. In early December 2016, an anonymous official told Reuters that President Obama has decided to halt future weapons sales involving precision-munitions to Saudi Arabia, saying the decision was a result of the rising number of civilian casualties. Hoping to target this signal towards Saudi’s war, the US upheld a $3.5 billion deal for CH-47 cargo helicopters and related equipment and training for Saudi “border defenses.”47 In another signal from the international community, the BND, the German intelligence agency, publically released a memo which called bin Salman a “political gambler,” naïve, and arrogant. This rare move clearly signals the concern within the German government (and in general the European Union) over bin Salman and the concentration of power within his hands, which “[harbors] a latent risk that in seeking to establish himself in the line of succession in his father’s lifetime, he may overreach.”48 In the end, though, this may prove to Saudi’s new generation that they must be responsible for their own security and cannot fully rely on America or the international community for their security – a fundamental reassertion of the anarchic and self-help system.

The first few months of the Trump administration has witnessed a dramatic reversal of the Obama-era policy and a closing of ranks between the US and Saudi, not just in Yemen but

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42 Stenslie, “Saudi Palace Intrigues, Yemeni Sufferings.”
45 Stenslie, “Saudi Palace Intrigues, Yemeni Sufferings.”
48 Cockburn, Patrick “Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.”
regionally. The Trump administration has signaled explicitly its preference for military action over diplomacy, which aligns with Saudi’s unspoken goal of ‘not a single Houthi in Yemen.’ Moreover, the administration’s maximalist positions against Iran in the Middle East pleases decision-makers in the Gulf, and as the war grinds into its second year, gives credence to continued military action in Yemen. Finally, the Obama-era halt on weapons to Saudi Arabia was recently reversed by the Trump administration, further signaling a Saudi-friendly approach in Yemen.

It remains to be seen how much of an effect the war will have on the domestic structure in Saudi Arabia’s national security apparatus. What is certain is that the Yemen campaign did not achieve any of the stated or unstated goals, and that in fact, it has complicated Saudi policy. Given that the new, aggressive foreign policy is contentious within the royal family, the possibility of a policy reversal to the traditional approach is always present. However, it seems likely that with the support of the US, regional Sunni states, and a domestic focus elsewhere, the changes instituted by the new Saudi national security structure will remain at least for the short-term.

Conclusion

The Yemen campaign followed a clear logic, which was informed by changes – or perceived changes – at the domestic, regional, and international level. However, the view of Yemen as central to Saudi national security policy did not change. The Yemen campaign was the result of the sibling shuffle. This reduced the power of the informal consultative group, the al-Sa’ud family, and other senior princes in various national security structures. The appointment of younger princes to key ministerial posts further concentrated the King’s power and signaled that the younger generation had gained greater influence over the domestic structure. The changing regional balance of power and an unknown international environment led to a re-evaluation of Saudi interests and challenges by the younger generation. Instead of a risk-adverse, stand-off policy of using money over guns, the younger generation concluded an aggressive foreign policy would reap widespread rewards. Beyond achieving their long-standing strategic objectives in Yemen, the campaign would allow the Saudis to finally move into a hegemonic regional position and send a stern warning to Iran that their meddling was no longer tolerated. Simply, the Yemen campaign’s assumptions rested on a fundamental re-reading of Saudi Arabia’s interests and challenges, which was allowed to occur because of the structural changes within the Saudi national security apparatus.

This episode highlights the importance of decision-makers’ beliefs, “their general worldviews, predispositions, and ideologies.” The King’s new men read changes at the three levels of analysis and concluded a shift away from Saudi’s traditional foreign policy was needed to deal

52 Stenslie, “Decisive Storm.”
with the fluid environment. It also demonstrates that “the over-concentration and personalization of power” can lead to seismic changes in policy. This suggests that in highly centralized states where power is personalized, analysis should weigh more heavily the worldviews and disposition of the leaders in determining foreign policy trajectories or outcomes.

Finally, this paper also points to the limits of sectarianism as an analytical tool. Rather than viewing sectarianism as primordial or a determinate of relations (the deep structure), it is more useful to view it as an instrument that is employed in balance of power politics. Indeed, in this sense, sectarianism is a “surface phenomenon…underneath which one will find the real drivers of politics, i.e. material power and interests.” This paper has demonstrated that looking beyond the surface explanation reveals a more analytically rich, and informative explanation for Saudi policy in Yemen. In short, although Saudi Arabia and Iran are employing sectarianism in their struggle for regional hegemony, their conflict in Yemen and indeed throughout the Middle East, can only be understood by appreciating the domestic, regional, and international determinates and structures shaping foreign policy outcomes.

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54 Hinnebusch, _The International Politics of the Middle East_, 129.
55 Legrenzi, Matteo. “Coming in from the Cold” in “International Relations Theory and a Changing Middle East.” _Project on Middle East Political Science: Studies #16_. 17 September 2015. 34-35.