

Global Hot Topics

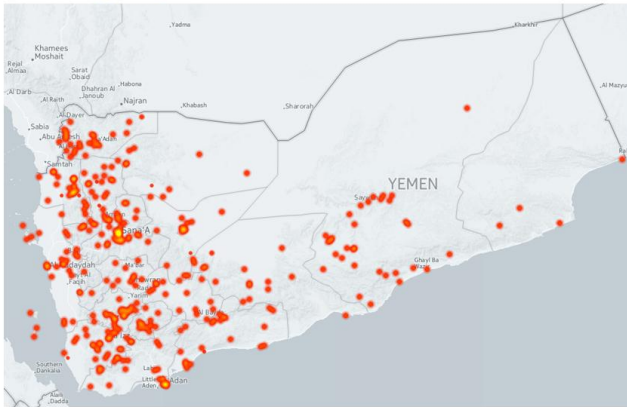
A new scenario for proxy war: Yemen

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Yemen is in the grip of its most severe crisis in years, as the possibility of a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia to control the country is increasing after Saudi Arabia's direct military intervention. The evolution of the situation in Yemen could greatly exacerbate regional tensions, triggering fragmentation and social unrest in the region.

Conflict activity in Yemen (Jan 2014 - Mar 2015)

Source: www.gdeit.org & BBVA Research



The fight against the Houthis could escalate even if Iran does nothing...

Instability in Yemen is rapidly escalating after the Saudi Arabia-led coalition (UAE, Kuwait, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, Pakistan, Morocco, Egypt and Sudan) against the Houthis began airstrikes in Yemen last 26 March. Saudi Arabia clearly moved in an attempt to counter Iran and to prevent Shiite unrest from spreading. On the other hand, Turkey, the other Sunni heavyweights in the region, is maintaining a more reserved stance in challenging Tehran. Despite Turkey announced that it can give logistical and intelligence support to the coalition while criticizing Iran's policies in Yemen and throughout the Middle East, it has used more subtle

methods such as backing moderate rebel forces in Syria with a 'train and equip programme' formulated jointly with the US and deepening its economic footprint in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

... although victory will not be easy

The political economy of war favours Saudi Arabia more than the Houthis, and the Saudi led coalition army, backed by US intelligence support, is superior to the Houthi militia. Therefore, **the Sunni coalition can stop the Houthi advance in Yemeni territory, but winning the war and bringing stability to Yemen will not be easy.** The Saudi-led multinational coalition faces a difficult and challenging mission in Yemen because of several factors:

- **The war against the Houthis could precipitate a sectarian clash within Yemen.** The collateral damage caused by the Saudi air strikes could increase the antipathy among the Yemenis towards Saudi Arabia, which might then also lead the Saudis to seek the support of local Sunni Yemenis, dividing the wider Yemeni population along sectarian lines.
- **AQAP's influence in Yemen could increase further.** Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and even ISIS, might find a receptive environment in Yemen to increase their influence without being contained as the Zaydi Houthis are being targeted. Moreover, the Iraqi experience indicates that the more active the AQAP and/or ISIS become, the more possible it will be for Yemen to drift into a sectarian clash.
- **Iran's "wait and see" policy depends on the nuclear negotiations.** It seems that Iran, which is known to back the Houthis in Yemen, is now in a "wait and see" position given the strategic importance of the reaching a nuclear deal with P5+1. For that reason, the country might have chosen to act less aggressively against Saudi Arabia, at least in the short term. Nonetheless, by condemning the ongoing airstrikes in Yemeni territory, Iran's position in Yemen, has become much more certain.

Looking ahead

The chances of a rapid and decisive victory by the Saudi-led coalition are uncertain, and the success of its operations depends on the kingdom's Yemeni allies on the ground and their progress in rolling back the Houthis' territorial gains. The risk of the conflict's escalation into a regional proxy war is still low and uncertain, but the situation in Yemen has become a primarily domestic affair in Middle East, which could have serious implications for the entire region and the security of the West.

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