

UNGOVERNED SPACES

Saudi jets, supported by those of nine other moderate Sunni Arab states, launched a series of co-ordinated air strikes against Shia Houthi rebels in war torn Yemen on 26 March as part of Operation Decisive Storm. Their first move was suppression of enemy air defences with attacks on Al-Dailami airbase near Sanaa International Airport. These took out four military aircraft and a number of surface-to-air missiles. In addition, to prevent reprisals, other air strikes targeted Houthi forces moving towards the Saudi-Yemeni border in the north of the country.

The Egyptian navy also deployed four warships into the Bab al-Mandeb Strait with a view to supporting Yemeni government troops under threat in Aden. The next day the jets were back, and air strikes continued with raids on the presidential compound in the capital, on Houthi held camps in Sana'a and in the northern Saada Province. Footage emerged on 4 April that reportedly showed an Egyptian naval vessel shelling areas of Aden.

In support of this air and naval campaign, the Saudis massed 150,000 troops on the border with Yemen in the region known as Rub' al Khali or the Empty Quarter. In reality, Riyadh has no stomach for another ground war in this region. The last time the Saudis tangled with the Houthis in 2008-09 it did not go well for their military in the mountainous terrain along the border.

Largely unnoticed in the West, a proxy war has therefore now broken out in Yemen. The country – long a battleground for both militant strands of Islam – finds itself centre stage in the ongoing Shia-Sunni conflict. The last thing Sunni Saudi Arabia wants to see is an Iranian backed Shia Houthi Government dominating the Gulf of Aden and the narrow entrance to the Red Sea. Ironically, just before Decisive Storm commenced, former British Foreign Minister Alistair Burt stated: "It can't be in either [Saudi Arabia or Iran's] interest for a proxy war to take place, least of all for the Yemeni people as well." The Saudis and their allies seem to think otherwise.

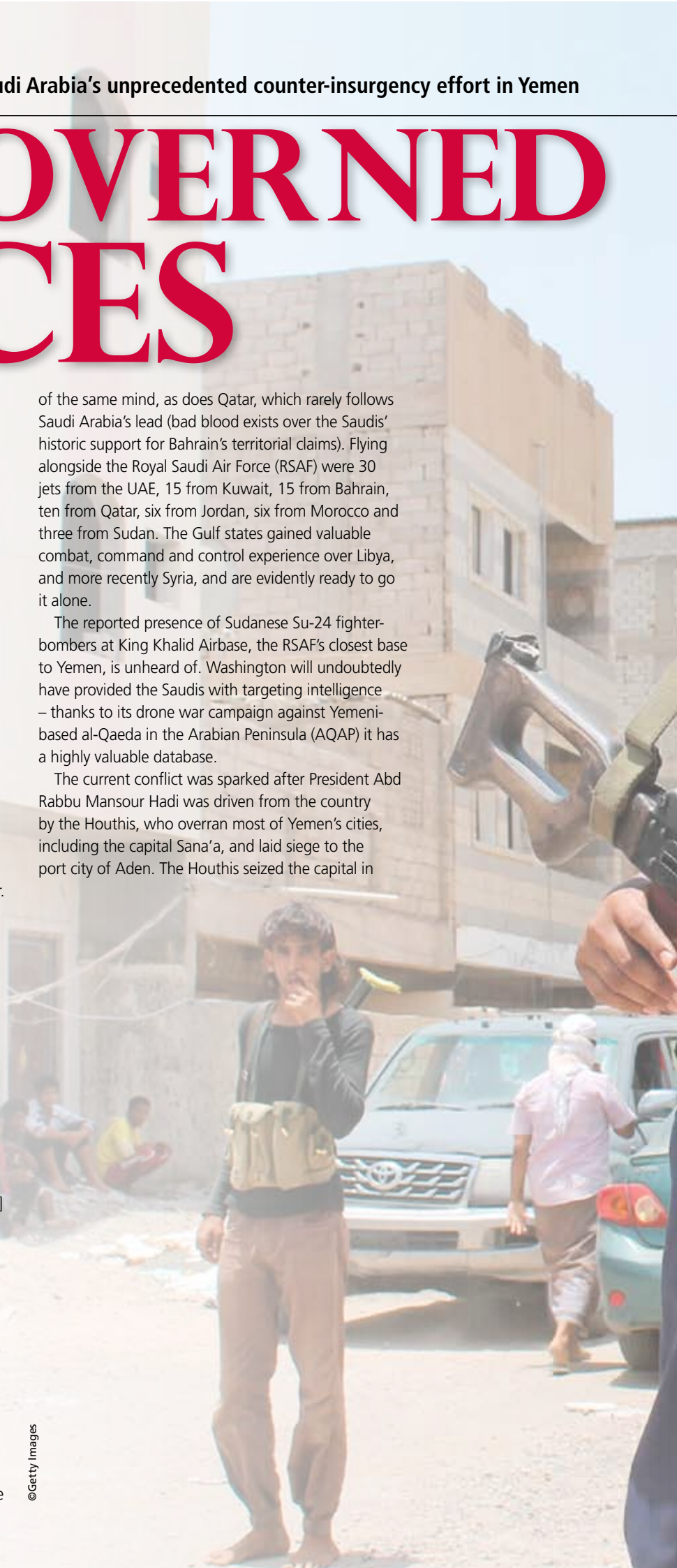
"The capacity of the people to absorb civil war is, of course, unending in the region," Alistair Burt added. "If we want to put an end to the misery, if we want to put an end to that equation that it's either tyranny or chaos, you've got to be prepared to try something different." Unfortunately Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states opted for the military option.

The latest crisis in Yemen has resulted in an unprecedented level of unity amongst the Arab states. Surprisingly Sudan, a long-time Iranian ally, seems to be

of the same mind, as does Qatar, which rarely follows Saudi Arabia's lead (bad blood exists over the Saudis' historic support for Bahrain's territorial claims). Flying alongside the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) were 30 jets from the UAE, 15 from Kuwait, 15 from Bahrain, ten from Qatar, six from Jordan, six from Morocco and three from Sudan. The Gulf states gained valuable combat, command and control experience over Libya, and more recently Syria, and are evidently ready to go it alone.

The reported presence of Sudanese Su-24 fighter-bombers at King Khalid Airbase, the RSAF's closest base to Yemen, is unheard of. Washington will undoubtedly have provided the Saudis with targeting intelligence – thanks to its drone war campaign against Yemeni-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) it has a highly valuable database.

The current conflict was sparked after President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi was driven from the country by the Houthis, who overran most of Yemen's cities, including the capital Sana'a, and laid siege to the port city of Aden. The Houthis seized the capital in



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September 2014, and in January 2015 took over the presidential palace, forcing Hadi's government to relocate to Aden. The Houthis overran pro-Hadi forces at Al-Anad airbase 50km northwest of Aden on 25 March. It was at this point Hadi was forced to flee to Riyadh via Oman.

Hadi argues the Houthis are backed by Iran, and the Saudi Ambassador to Washington claims to have intelligence that Iran's Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shia militia, are in Yemen assisting the Houthis. Behind the scenes, Riyadh had already put together a coalition of the willing that acted with remarkable speed. This act alone serves as tacit acknowledgement by the Sunni Arab monarchies that they cannot rely on Washington to bail them out.

Yemen now finds itself the latest victim of the Arab Spring and the wider Shia-Sunni conflict that is currently blighting the rest of the Middle East. Once Yemeni strongman and one-time US ally President Ali Abdullah Saleh had been removed from the scene in 2012, the country descended into chaos. Saleh benefited from generous US military aid in his war against Sunni AQAP and Shia Ansar Allah – better known as the Houthi. For years he had played a delicate balancing game but, like Gaddafi in Libya and Mubarak in Egypt, he did not weather the Arab Spring.

It was Saleh who sowed the seeds for the current conflict. In a desperate attempt to cling to power he cut a deal with Sami Dayan, the local emir of AQAP. To free forces to prop up his regime in Sana'a, he agreed to withdraw troops from Abyan province. In May 2011, as pro-democracy demonstrators took to the streets intent on driving Saleh out of Sana'a, al-Qaeda occupied Abyan and held it for a year.

When Saleh stepped down in 2012 he performed a remarkable about face. Many of the powerful army units trained and equipped by Washington, who remained loyal to Saleh, sided with the Houthis who are resolutely opposed to AQAP. It is widely assumed that this was on the orders of Saleh. Notably, the military bases home to pro-Saleh forces were the targets of many of the air strikes in the second night of Decisive Storm.

Like Somalia, its northern Yemeni neighbour has all the makings of a failed state. Central government has all but collapsed, creating what has been dubbed "ungoverned space". Although the Houthis hold Sana'a, it is unlikely they will be able to take control of the Sunni tribal heartlands and AQAP hinterland. There is alarm that this Saudi-led military operation could result in a resurgent AQAP. Certainly if the air attacks weaken the Houthis it will enable AQAP to regain lost territory and conduct new attacks. With rival regimes in Sana'a and Aden, much of the rest of the country has been left to fend for itself.

In February 2015, the pro al-Qaeda group Ansar al-Sharia captured an army base in the town of Bayhan,

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in Shabwa province, despite the presence of a thousand troops. The militants made off with captured heavy weaponry. Since Decisive Storm opened, AQAP has moved into the vacuum seizing Mukalla, the capital of Hadramaut province to the east of Aden.

Decisive Storm did not succeed in halting the Houthi advance into the provinces of Abyan and Shabwa. Despite the air strikes, the Houthi still managed to capture an army base overlooking the Bab al-Mandab, the sea-lane that leads to the Red Sea and the vital Suez Canal, and attacked the centre of Aden. They also captured the headquarters of the pro-Hadi 35th Armoured Brigade in Yemen's third city Taiz. This unit was considered one of the Yemeni armed forces' better formations.

The Saudis strategy is clearly designed to prevent the Houthi taking Aden; a ground offensive to the north would not greatly help this other than perhaps by diverting Houthi troops. Such an operation would be costly, but Riyadh does have an old score to settle. To the south, Aden could act as a springboard from which the Gulf States forces could operate in support of reinstalling Hadi to power. Meanwhile, Yemeni Sunni tribesmen have been rallying to the Saudi-led campaign.

The West seems largely content to sit this one out.

The US Defense Department has admitted that it fast tracked intelligence sharing and weapons deliveries (bombs and guidance kits) to Saudi Arabia. The US Air Force has also reportedly been playing a role, with KC-135 air-to-air refuelling tankers supporting Saudi F-15 and Emirati F-16 aircraft combat missions. The UK has said it is acting in a similar manner.

Former British foreign minister Alistair Burt summed up the situation on the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, saying: "Yemen means lots of things to lots of people, but being very blunt about it, what it means for Western powers is an ungoverned space, and as ungoverned space threatens us in London as it affects people all over the world."

Saudi Arabia suspended the air war in late April only to promptly resume it with Operation Restoring Hope and attacks on Aden, Dalea, Ibb and Taiz. On the ground, clashes continued between pro-Hadi loyalists and Houthi supporters at Aden, Huita and Daleh. Saleh tried to broker a ceasefire by calling on the Houthi to withdraw from the territory they had occupied in return for a halt to the Saudi-led air strikes. In reality there will be no quick fix to Yemen's woes; while the Gulf states may have acted decisively, there will be no decisive solution to the security morass that besets the country.

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Yemeni fighters of the Shiite Huthi movement shout slogans during a rally against US and Saudi intervention

