

A Huthi Missile, a Saudi Purge and a Lebanese Resignation Shake the Middle East

Volatility is rising across the Middle East as local, regional and international conflicts increasingly intertwine and amplify each other. Four Crisis Group analysts give a 360-degree view of the new risks of overlapping conflicts that involve Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon and Israel.

On 4 November 2017, Huthi/Saleh forces in Yemen fired a Burkan 2-H long-range ballistic missile at the Saudi capital, Riyadh. It was intercepted and destroyed before reaching its target. The attack occurred during a profound political shakeup in Saudi Arabia, where Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is seeking to consolidate power, and amid dramatic Saudi political manoeuvrings in the region which led to the resignation of Lebanon's prime minister, Saad Hariri. Adding to the volatility, Israel has been making veiled – and not so veiled – threats about its intent to prevent Hizbollah from developing an indigenous capacity to build sophisticated precision missiles.



Houthi fighters walk at the site of an air strike on a parade square in Sanaa, Yemen on November 5, 2017. REUTERS/Khaled Abdullah.

The Yemen War Is a Trigger Point for Wider Conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran

**By April Longley Alley, Project Director,
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Although the Huthi/Saleh alliance has fired dozens of rockets into Saudi territory this year, this missile launch is the farthest on record and the closest they have come to hitting a major population centre. The fact that they have the capability to strike Riyadh raises the political stakes as well as the cost of war for Saudi Arabia. It also means that other Gulf cities may soon be in target range; on 8 November, the Huthis threatened further attacks on Saudi and Emirati ports and airports. Given growing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the U.S. administration's eagerness to push back against Tehran, missile strikes by the Huthis in Gulf countries or in the Red Sea arguably are the single most dangerous trigger points for widening the conflict beyond Yemen to a regional confrontation.

Yet lost amid the regional dynamics is the Yemeni political context. The Huthi/Saleh alliance didn't fire the missile as part of the Iranian-Saudi conflict; rather, they did so for domestic reasons. They view their missile program, rightly or wrongly, as the best way to retaliate against Saudi-led coalition airstrikes, which have devastated parts of north Yemen over the past two and a half years, and also as the best bargaining chip in future negotiations. Tellingly, the missile attack came on the heels of two Saudi airstrikes in the Huthis' home governorate of Saada, which reportedly killed 38 people, eight of them children.

Intra-Huthi dynamics also could be at play. The strike came at a time of behind-the-scenes efforts to restart stalled negotiations to end the war, and thus may have been an indication that the Huthi bloc's harder-line military wing may be out of step with its political negotiators and is acting to pre-empt talks. In this context, the most effective way to minimise the risk

of future missile attacks would be to reduce coalition airstrikes, especially those with the potential to result in civilian casualties, and quickly revive meaningful negotiations so that would-be Huthi dealmakers acquire leverage over hardliners deeply sceptical of a political compromise. Since the missile launch, however, the coalition has done precisely the opposite.

Driven by local factors, the strike nonetheless risks having dangerous regional and even international ramifications. Saudi Arabia and the U.S. directly linked the strikes to both Iran and Hizbollah, on the plausible basis that the Huthis' mastery of missile technology benefited strongly from their assistance. A Saudi-led coalition spokesman went so far as to warn that the latest attack on Riyadh could be considered "an act of war", with fingers clearly pointed to Tehran and Beirut.

Should the Saudis choose to retaliate, they would have only limited options inside Yemen, and these would come with significant risks. They could tighten the noose on Huthi/Saleh-controlled territories through an enlarged and more tightly enforced blockade. They already are doing this. On 6 November, they announced the temporary closure of all of Yemen's land, air and seaports, ostensibly to prevent the flow of weapons from Iran to the Huthis.

But this approach is fraught with problems. First, whatever weapons are being smuggled into Yemen are unlikely to be passing through the main entry points currently closed off, namely the Huthi-controlled port of Hodeida as well as the Saudi-led coalition-controlled ports

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of Aden and Mukalla and airports in Aden and Saiyoun (Hadamout). More probably, they are entering Yemen through smaller ports along the Red Sea and Arabian Sea coasts, or through land crossings via Oman – vast areas that are nearly impossible for the coalition to seal.

Second, the Saudis are shooting themselves in the foot by closing off access to areas nominally under the Hadi government’s control in the south. They are punishing the people with whom they are politically aligned and whose support they need to maintain.

Third and most important are the humanitarian consequences. Supplies to Huthi/Saleh-controlled areas already have been sharply reduced due to coalition restrictions. As imports from Hodeida have declined, the Saudi border crossing of al-Wadi’a and Aden port have picked up the slack. If these vital access points are closed down, civilians will suffer the most, and Huthi/Saleh fighters will be the last and least affected. Already, Yemen represents the most severe hunger crisis in the world, with an estimated seventeen million people who are food-insecure. The coalition’s promise that the embargo will not affect humanitarian assistance is nice rhetoric but of virtually no practical impact. Aid cannot possibly address the food needs of all 27-28 million Yemenis. Sanaa is experiencing severe fuel shortages as a result of the announced closures, and these will further reduce the volume of food reaching markets. They will also affect the water supply, as water must be pumped from deep underground.

So far, the economic strangulation of the north has empowered the Huthi military wing, which has privileged control over and access to limited resources flowing into their areas. There is little reason to believe that more of the same will produce a different outcome.

Military options also are limited. By this point, the coalition has exhausted legitimate military targets from the air. Immediately after the missile strike, coalition bombers unleashed a barrage of airstrikes on Sanaa, repeatedly hitting military targets previously struck, and adding new but largely symbolic ones, such as the city’s parade ground. The coalition could expand its target list to include civilian infrastructure, government buildings and the homes of Huthi/Saleh leaders, as it has done in the past. But this would bring international scrutiny and condemnation as a result of inevitable civilian casualties, while also feeding the deep and growing resentment toward Saudi Arabia in the north.

The coalition also could put more troops on the ground to try to capture territory in north Yemen. One problem it would face is where to find such troops. Saudi-trained and supplied Yemeni forces consistently have failed to register military successes. Saudi Arabia has not been willing to put its own troops on the ground and is probably less likely to do so now, given developments inside the country. In contrast, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has committed troops in southern Yemen and has proven quite capable, but it remains unclear how much further they can or will go, given that a fight in the Huthi/Saleh northern heartland doubtless would result in significant casualties.

The U.S. conceivably could step in to help the coalition capture Hodeida and other areas. While this may produce gains, it likely would rally additional northern fighters to the fronts, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. The battle would become increasingly prolonged if it subsequently moved into the highlands.

In short, what can be done from the air in Yemen has already been done. What territory could be taken in the south with the strong backing of local populations has already been taken. Additional gains on the ground would be costly for all sides involved. Given that they are fighting on their home turf, Huthi/Saleh

fighters almost certainly have a higher tolerance for escalation than their adversaries.

What is more, the attack on Riyadh temporarily brought the Huthis and Saleh's forces closer together. Their cooperation had been fraying and their incipient divisions had opened up a small window for negotiations, as Crisis Group argued in a recent report. Yet today, both view the missile launch as a resounding

success. Absent the resumption of political talks, the prospects for which have suffered a clear setback, we should expect more missiles headed toward Riyadh, and sooner or later a Saudi/U.S. response, whose target could be Yemen, Iran or Hizbollah. By all accounts, the current trajectory bodes poorly for a return to stability in Yemen, and may presage an ominous escalation in the region.

The Potential Cost to Iran of Its Expanding Rivalry with Saudi Arabia

By Ali Vaez, Project Director, Iran

U.S. as well as Saudi officials have claimed that Tehran plays a substantial role in arming the Yemeni movement, particularly through the provision of missile parts and training. While there is evidence of Iranian weapons supplies to the Huthis, including the transfer of drone technology, as well as of Iranian advisory and training support to the Huthis, notably via Hizbollah, the same cannot be said regarding any ongoing provision of significant amounts of military hardware.

Likewise, although Iran sees real benefit in a Saudi Arabia caught in the Yemeni quagmire at very low cost to Tehran, it is unclear whether Iran exerts the kind of influence over the Huthis that would enable it to order or prevent such an attack. Indeed, the Huthis are known to have ignored Iran's advice on consequential decisions in the past, for example when they entered Sanaa and subsequently moved south to Aden. In other words, Iran ultimately might pay a price for actions by an allied group it does not control.

Against this backdrop, Iran's ties with the Huthis are a subject of debate among Tehran policymakers. One view, prevalent in the

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military and security establishment, appears to consider the Huthis a natural, potentially long-term ally, and accordingly argues for strengthening the group in order to keep Saudi Arabia off-balance. The second is the perspective of the elected government of President Hassan Rouhani, which sees Iran's ties with the Huthis as useful, but only as long as the group's actions do not harm Iran's strategic interests.

For now, some in Tehran seem to be sensing the risks. The hard-line Kayhan newspaper explicitly welcomed the missile strike on Riyadh as an apt retaliation for the devastation the Saudis have inflicted on Yemen, and speculated that Dubai could be the Huthis' next target. In response, the country's Supreme National Security Council suspended the powerful outlet for two days for undermining national security. This was virtually unprecedented, given Kayhan's position on the political spectrum, and reflects sensitivity at the highest levels against handing Iran's foes a good pretext to retaliate. Even generally hard-line politicians say they see Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel colluding to heat up the region's conflicts, including by destabilising Lebanon, in order to push the U.S. and Iran into a military confrontation.

This development also should be seen in the broader context of Iran's rivalry with the U.S. and its regional allies. Friction between them is rising in eastern Syria as both sides

rush to seize territory from a rapidly diminishing Islamic State (ISIS). This also comes at a time when the Trump administration has launched a broad campaign to demonise Iran as the source of all the region's troubles and as acting in collusion with al-Qaeda, while refusing to certify Iran's compliance with the 2015 nuclear agreement, thereby casting doubt on the accord's sustainability. All of this has heightened tensions between the U.S. and Iran, and none of which has been accompanied – let alone mollified – by diplomatic engagement between the two countries.

If the U.S. were to take military action against Iranian facilities in reaction to the Huthi missile strike, Iran's response likely would depend on circumstances. If the strike originated from the territory of a regional country, Iran arguably could directly retaliate

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against it. Conversely, if the strike originated from a U.S. warship, a direct response would be far less probable given U.S. escalation dominance. In either case, the more plausible reaction would be indirect and asymmetric, using Iran's proxies or partners to target U.S. forces in Iraq, Syria or Afghanistan. Iran's leaders likely know that they could lose control of such a dynamic and they do not seem hungry for a direct military confrontation. Still, in the eyes of Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, not responding to U.S. aggression only would invite more of it.

Saudi Arabia's Counter-productive Show of Strength in Lebanon

By Heiko Wimmen, Project Director, Iraq/Syria/Lebanon

That Prime Minister Hariri announced his resignation from Riyadh clearly made him look like he was acting on Saudi orders. That impression was reinforced by what had happened both prior to and after that event. Immediately preceding the announcement, strongly worded anti-Hizbollah statements had come from prominent Saudi officials, including Minister of State for Gulf Affairs Thamer Sabhan. Later, none of Hariri's advisors in Lebanon could fully explain what happened, where he was going, and whether he was free to return. Under the circumstances, most Lebanese political leaders assumed Hariri was being held against his will. If Riyadh wanted to show the world that it was in charge of Hariri's fate, it succeeded.

The question is why Riyadh made this decision now. Saudi Arabia implicitly blessed the deal Hariri struck with Hizbollah and that

allowed him to gain the premiership nearly a year ago. That the Saudi leadership ever could have seriously entertained the notion that Hariri could “rein in” Hizbollah appears fanciful if one takes even a cursory look at the group's relationship to previous Lebanese governments since 2005, which it either dominated, defied or toppled at will.

Nor is it plausible to assume that Hariri's resignation would compel Hizbollah to change its ways. With the party and its allies effectively monopolising the vote of the Shiite community – roughly a third of the Lebanese population – no government can be formed without its consent. The most likely near-term scenario is therefore that Lebanon once again will be stuck without a functional government, a situation that arguably serves Hizbollah more than harms it. Indeed, rather than being portrayed as the source of the problem, Hizbollah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, now can cast

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his party as a proponent of “safety and stability for Lebanon” – as he did in a televised speech the day after Hariri’s announcement – whose partner walked out on him at the behest of a foreign power. Finally, being out of government does nothing to restrain Hizbollah’s regional activities.

That leaves other possible motives for Riyadh to have made its move now. With the U.S. adopting a harder line against Iran and slapping new sanctions on Hizbollah, Saudi Arabia may have sensed an opportunity to reinforce that trend in order to isolate and pressure its regional rival. Hariri’s resignation as prime minister on the grounds of excessive Iranian and Hizbollah meddling furthers that goal by bolstering the case that those two actors need to be restrained and that coexistence with either one is impossible. It also paves the way for possible punitive action against Lebanon and the Shiite movement, again with the goal of weakening both it and its Iranian ally.

For now, Hariri’s resignation on its own is unlikely to have a major impact on the political situation in Lebanon. It will not destabilise the country in the near future, and he could theoretically remain in a caretaker position until elections in 2018. Likewise, while regional pressure on Hizbollah could rise, no domestic actor is in a position to mount a credible military challenge to the Shiite movement. And the manner of Hariri’s departure is unlikely to galvanise an already weakened Sunni community to mobilise on his behalf.

The most immediate cause for worry is of an economic nature. With the Qatari precedent in mind, and in light of Saudi statements casting the Lebanese government as an

enemy, Lebanese officials and members of the business community are bracing for Riyadh’s and its Gulf allies’ potential punitive measures. Already, several Gulf countries have ordered their citizens to depart Lebanon. Should they either cut off imports from the country or, worse, expel some of the hundreds of thousands of Lebanese living in the Gulf – thereby affecting billions of dollars in remittances – the impact on an already fragile economy could be dramatic. What Qatar could cushion thanks to its vast wealth and reserves, Lebanon would have a far harder time to survive. Saudi Arabia’s Western allies in particular ought to urge it to refrain from such a devastating step.

The other question on Lebanese minds has less to do with Saudi Arabia or their own domestic actors than with Israel. It remains the only force that could seriously degrade Hizbollah’s military capability, which would have a devastating effect on the rest of the country. Israeli officials have drawn an implicit red line regarding the transfer of production facilities for the domestic manufacturing of precision-guided missiles. A serious build-up of Hizbollah and other pro-Iranian forces on Syria’s border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights also could become a *casus belli*. Hariri’s resignation and Saudi Arabia’s assertion that Lebanon is now in the hands of a terrorist entity arguably facilitates an Israeli assault. But the Shiite movement and many others in Lebanon seek reassurance in what they call the “balance of terror”: the prospect that an Israeli attack could provoke Hizbollah to rely on its massive stock of short-to-mid-range missiles to strike Israeli civilian areas.

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Israel Faces New Risks in Enforcing Its Red Lines against Hizbollah

By Ofer Zalberg, Senior Analyst, Israel/Palestine

Israel is concerned about Hizbollah's growing strength in both Lebanon and Syria because of the severity of damage their next war would cause on the Israeli home-front – damage so severe that the prospect of such a war could curb to a degree Israel's freedom of manoeuvre for fear of triggering one.

In particular, Israeli officials say they will do their best diplomatically and militarily to prevent Hizbollah from setting up offensive infrastructure in south-west Syria because its defence establishment assesses that Israel's deterrence doctrine would likely fail to effectively prevent its use should that occur. If Hizbollah were to move into the area, it could fire across the border at Israeli civilians while Israel would be limited to targeting Hizbollah fighters in retaliation; these, as Israel sees it, can easily be replaced. (By contrast, in Lebanon, Israel's ability to harm civil infrastructure has restrained Hizbollah). Indeed, Israel's only way to exact a real cost from Hizbollah in Syria in such a scenario would be by attacking targets in Beirut, Damascus or Tehran. This easily could provoke a broader conflagration that Israel might well rather avoid.

Moreover, Israel specifically marked provision of high-precision long-range missiles to Hizbollah as a red line, and has attacked dozens of convoys crossing Syria to enforce it. These actions have not stemmed the tide of long- and short-range missiles and rockets, of which

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Hizbollah now reportedly has over 130,000 in its arsenal, as compared to roughly 15,000 in 2006, prior to their last war. But they did limit the number of high-precision long-range missiles that came through Syria, the kind that can deliver a 400kg warhead on a tall residential building in downtown Tel Aviv and generally threaten Tel Aviv, Ben Gurion airport and Israel's strategic maritime gas rigs.

Reports since July have suggested that Hizbollah is trying to establish underground long-range missile factories in Lebanon with Iranian support. Israel relayed messages to the U.S. and others that it would take military action to prevent this, a warning that, according to Israeli officials, induced Hizbollah to freeze construction. The dominant official view in Israel is that it can afford to take out any such facility should construction resume, because any Hizbollah retaliation to such a targeted strike likely would itself be narrowly focused and thus fall short of triggering a full-fledged war.

The Israeli establishment also expects Russia to restrain Hizbollah, just as it has restrained President Bashar Assad when Israeli strikes took out Syrian military targets over the past few months. They believe Iran is similarly not keen to see Hizbollah's military arsenal destroyed over this: it has armed Hizbollah, in part, as a second-strike capacity to deter Israel from striking Iran itself, a threat Tehran obviously would want to maintain. Hizbollah itself has more pressing priorities as its fighters continue to fight in Syria. In short, Israel views a limited Hizbollah counter-attack as the more likely reaction and a risk that would be worth taking to prevent Hizbollah from acquiring the indigenous ability to produce high-precision long-range missiles. In turn, Israeli plans assume a purposefully limited reaction to any such Hizbollah retaliation.

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This situation imposes certain limits on Israel. As noted, its army leadership knows it needs to restrict its military objectives in order to reduce chances of all-out war. It also will need a compelling legitimising narrative to secure broad international backing – possibly coupled, unfamiliarly, with explicit regional support given the recent upswing of Iran-Saudi tensions – and domestic public support in the

event that a strike and counter-strike scenario leads to full-scale war.

A large-scale military confrontation between Israel and Hizbollah is an unlikely direct or immediate result of Hariri’s resignation if only because – as far as Israeli officialdom is concerned – not much has changed. It has long argued that Hizbollah effectively controls Lebanon. Yet, his stepping down provides grist for the public relations mill, since it reveals to the world Israel’s contention about the power balance in Lebanon. Netanyahu seems keen to use this in order to further mobilise international pressures against Hizbollah.