

Intelligence Bulletin

November 8, 2017

A Change in the Ground Rules: The Iranian – Saudi Power Struggle Severely Escalates

Information:

On Saturday November 4, 2017 Saudi Arabia announced that it had successfully intercepted a ballistic missile launched by Houthi rebels in Yemen. The missile was aimed at the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh.

The spokesman of the Saudi led military coalition fighting the Houthis accused Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah of providing the missile and the military know-how to the Iranian-backed Houthis. He emphasized that Iran and the Hezbollah smuggle weapons and ammunition to the Houthis. He added that the Saudi led military coalition intends to implement a strict policy to monitor the traffic and inspect the goods and commodities entering Yemen by air, land, and sea.

Saudi Arabia officially described the Houthi attack as an “*Iranian act of war*” against Saudi Arabia and a violation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216. Therefore, Saudi Arabia reserves the right to retaliate as a means of self-defense. That message was reiterated by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud.

Following the Saudi announcement, the Houthis displayed the “Al-Mandeb 1” anti-naval missile system - the name alludes to the strategically significant Bab al-Mandeb Strait.

The Pentagon has reportedly welcomed the tough Saudi rhetoric. On November 6, 2017 the Pentagon announced that “*The US maintains strong defense relations with Saudi Arabia and work together...to end Iran's destabilizing influence in the Middle East*”.

Analysis:

Yemen is one of eight active arenas (the others are the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, three Islands in the Gulf near the Strait of Hormuz, the Iranian Nuclear Project) of a massive power struggle in the Middle East between Iran and its proxies on the one hand, and the Arab states in general and the Arab Gulf Monarchies in particular - led by Saudi Arabia, on the other hand. (*On that issue read for example my article [“A Growing Whirlpool of Violence: The Middle East Legacy of Barack Obama”](#) ~ January 2017*)

In September 2014, Houthi Shi’ite tribes in Yemen initiated a military coup, ousting the Yemenite government. The Houthis – which historically have been primarily based in North Yemen – rushed to occupy Yemen's capital Sana’a, and expanded their control into vast areas in Yemen.

Following the coup and the ensuing expansion of the Houthis throughout Yemen, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition - including the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Sudan, and in March 2015 the Saudi led coalition launched a counter-military operation to thwart the Houthis advance, restore the rule of ousted Yemenite government, and block Iran’s attempt to deepen its influence in Yemen. (*Read more about the crisis in Yemen: [Crisis in Yemen: Significant Milestone](#)” March 2015*).

As of the end of 2017, the war in Yemen continues. It is reported that the war has thus far claimed the lives of 10,000 people, it has also brought massive destruction and a severe humanitarian crisis to Yemen.

Accumulating reports indicate Iran massively arms and support the Houthis.

Iran’s expansionist policy is predominately based on the model of operating armed proxies in different arenas - Iraq, Lebanon, Syrian the Gaza Strip, Yemen, etc. in the service of the Iranian Mullah regime, while the Iranians sit

comfortably in Teheran exempted from the direct repercussions and retaliation. (*On the Iranian proxy model read my article [“My Enemy is My Best Asset”](#) ~ September 2017*).

The November 4th missile attack could not have taken place without Iranian approval.

It is important to note that that this is not the first time that the Houthis have launched missile attacks on Saudi Arabia.

In October 2016, the Saudi defense system intercepted a missile allegedly targeting Islam’s holiest site - the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia. That event, however, was not met with an escalation of Saudi rhetoric as we see now.

The most recent shooting of the ballistic missile at Saudi Arabia is likely a reflection of growing Iranian concern fueled by the drastic change in the United States policy towards Iran.

President Obama's rapprochement towards Iran has been replaced by President Trump’s tough line accurately identifying Iran and its proxies - and particularly the Lebanese Hezbollah - as a major source of threat to the region. (*On that see for example my article [“Taking the Kidnapper Hostage: The Battle Over the Sovereignty of Lebanon”](#) August 2017*).

The Mullah regime suspects that the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel plan to initiate a strike against Iran's major proxy – the Lebanese Hezbollah – the most significant proxy in Iran’s expansion plan.

That suspicion is further deepened by the substantial escalation of the Saudi rhetoric against Iran in the days before the missile launch.

On Monday October 30, 2017 the Saudi Arabian Minister for Gulf Affairs described the Lebanese Hezbollah as a *“Satanic Militia in the service of Iranian terror.”*

On Saturday November 4, 2017 Lebanese Prime Minister Saad El-Din Rafik Al-Hari announced his resignation. In a speech he delivered from Saudi Arabia, Al-Hariri directly attacked both Iran and Hezbollah, proclaiming that *“Iran's hand will be cut off.”*

Given the above, the anxiety on the part of the Mullah regime is not groundless.

Authorizing Saturday’s attack appears to be a miscalculated move which might actually backfire on the Mullah regime.

Why?

1. It plays straight into the hands of the United States and Saudi Arabia, who argue – and rightfully so – that Iran is the major source of threat to the region.
2. Facing an unfriendly US administration, the Mullah regime strives to gain the support of European factors who disagree with the tough US line towards Iran. Shooting the missile may cause some significant European factors to reevaluate their soft approach towards Iran. For example, the United Kingdom formally condemned the attack.
3. The snow-ball effect following the attack - and particularly the display of an anti-naval missile by the Houthis – puts Iran on a collision track with one of the most powerful regional factors - Egypt.

Until now Egypt has had a relatively limited participation in the Saudi led military coalition fighting against the Iranian backed Houthis in Yemen. However, Egypt has consistently made it very clear that any threat on the strategic Bab al-Mandeb Strait is an intolerable threat on Egypt's national security and will not be ignored – or tolerated.

4. The Mullah regime is facing growing challenges in the two most crucial arenas in its expansion plan and vision – Syria and Iraq.

- a. In Syria, Iran's most powerful proxy – the Lebanese Hezbollah – is stuck fighting in Syria and as of now it seems will need to stay there for the foreseeable future.

The same applies to other Iranian backed Shi'ites operating in Syria.

Russia, who holds the keys for a future political agreement in Syria, is not necessarily committed to an agreement which will fully address the Iranian aspirations.

- b. In Iraq, major Shi'ite Iraqi leaders express growing discontent with the growing Iranian presence and influence in Iraq.

While at the same time, the Iraqi Prime Minister Al-'Abadi, whose power has strengthened following his successful bout against ISIS, as well as his handling of the Kurdish crisis, has boosted Iraq's relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Therefore, the timing is not right for the Mullah regime to find itself involved in a direct military confrontation with Saudi Arabia which most likely would include the US.

Evaluation:

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that Saudi Arabia has formally accused Iran of “*directly waging an act of war*” on Saudi Arabia. And this is the first time that Saudi Arabia has threatened to retaliate against Iran directly.

Thus, in my evaluation, the recent dramatic statement on the part of the Saudis is a significant milestone in the evolving and escalating Iranian-Arab power struggle - as it signals a change in the rules of the game.

The Saudi message is clear. From now on, as opposed to Iran deploying its proxies and agents, as the Mullah regime sit safely in Tehran – Saudi Arabia will hold Iran accountable for the actions and attacks of its proxies on Saudi Arabia, and accordingly, Iran may face direct repercussions - including Saudi military retaliation.

Prediction:

In the foreseeable future, the Mullah regime is likely to apply a cautious policy aimed at preventing a direct military collision with Saudi Arabia and the US.

However, as part of the psychological warfare - which the Mullah regime excels in, they will likely continue with their tough and decisive rhetoric encompassed with a symbolic “flexing of their muscles” – for example conducting Iranian Naval maneuvers in the Gulf.

However, the change in the ground rules - manifested by the Saudi statements following the attack, as well as the implementation of inspections of incoming traffic to Yemen, substantially increases the probability of a direct Saudi-Iranian military collision in the Gulf area.

The risk of the current very tense situation spinning out of control and exceeding the Gulf is real.

Closing remarks:

In my article “[Is war in the Middle East Inevitable?](#)” (February 2012) as well as in my article “[Pax- Amer-Iran](#)” (March 2015) and my article “[A Growing Whirlpool of Violence: The Middle East Legacy of Barack Obama](#)” (January 2017) I have expressed deep concern that the Middle East policy of President Barack Obama - and particularly the

rapprochement towards Iran, will likely result in a growing whirlpool of violence, destruction, and bloodshed - with impacts exceeding the region.

Sadly, my concern was justified - and with the recent escalation of the Iranian-Saudi power struggle, the whirlpool it is getting stronger.

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A New Middle East Requires a New Understanding

Avi Melamed who serves as the [Salisbury Fellow of Intelligence and Middle East Affairs](#) for the [Eisenhower Institute](#) with offices at Gettysburg College and in Washington, DC, is an expert on the Current Affairs in the Arab and Muslim World Arab and their impact on Israel and the Middle East.

His expertise includes: The Arab Awakening and Regional Ramifications; Arab perspectives on Israel; Current Affairs in the Arab World - and their Impact on Israel; Emerging Challenges and Opportunities in the Middle East; Evolving Forces in the Region; the Gaza Strip; the Geostrategic Environment of the Middle East; the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict; Jerusalem; Roots and Ideology of Radical Islam; Terrorism; the War in Syria; the West Bank; and In Through the Chimney - A New Approach to Countering BDS.

Avi is a former Israeli Intelligence Official and Senior Official on Arab Affairs. In his decades of public service, Avi - an Israeli Jew who is fluent in Arabic, English and Hebrew, with a unique understanding of Arab society and culture - has held high-risk Government, Senior Advisory, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorist intelligence positions in Arab cities and communities throughout the region – often in very sensitive times - on behalf of the Israeli government agencies.

As an Author, Educator, Strategic Intelligence Analyst, Avi Melamed educates current and future leaders around the world about Israel and the Middle East and trains them to be Media Literate Critical Thinkers who dialogue with reality and don't get sidetracked by concepts, narratives and theories.

He coauthored [Separate and Unequal: Israel's Rule in East Jerusalem](#) in 1999, and he wrote *Ubrusi: The Novel* in 2010. His newest book. Avi's newest book, [Inside the Middle East: Making Sense of the Most Dangerous and Complicated Region on Earth, \(also just released as an audio book\)](#) a GPS to help you navigate the dramatically changing Middle East offers a unique insight into the Arab world, challenges widely-accepted perceptions, provides a guide to make sense of the events unfolding in the region, and offers an out of the box idea that could lead to a positive breakthrough in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.

He is the Founder and Director of the Eisenhower Institute's "[Inside the Middle East – Intelligence Perspectives](#)" program designed to ensure that the next generation of policy makers and influencers will be knowledgeable about Israel and the Middle East and will apply methods of critical thinking regarding Middle East Affairs.

Avi provides intelligence analysis, briefings and tours to diplomats, Israeli and foreign policy makers, international media outlets and a wide variety of organizations and private clients on a range of Israel and Middle East affairs.

In the private sector Avi facilitates relationships between Israeli and international firms and potential partners in the Arab world.

He is also the founder and creator of Feenjan – Israel speaks Arabic, a non-profit initiative which presents contemporary Israeli society and culture to the Arab world in Arabic, and serves as an online platform for Israelis and Arabs to discover and discuss issues of common interest.

Avi has his finger on the pulse on the Arab world. With a proven record of foreseeing the evolution of events in the Middle East and their impact on a local and regional level.

Through all of his efforts, as an analyst, educator, entrepreneur, and writer, Avi is a bridge builder. He dedicates himself to enhancing the Arabic, English and Hebrew speaking audience's comprehensive understanding of the Middle East and of each other.

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