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Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Yemen: The First Test of the Makkah Alliance?

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The renewed war in Yemen may have come at an inconvenient time for the newly created Makkah Joint Defence Agreement between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. The agreement, signed in Makkah on August 7, declares that an armed attack against any one of the three countries will be regarded as an attack against all. Its stated purpose is collective deterrence and enhanced defence cooperation.

Barely a month later, however, the alliance faces a difficult question that its architects may not have anticipated would arise so quickly: *what happens if the Houthis turn their war against Saudi Arabia into a sustained military confrontation?*

The question has become more urgent following the Houthi seizure of Al-Mokha, a strategically located port on Yemen's Red Sea coast. The capture puts the Houthis closer to the Bab el-Mandeb, the narrow maritime gateway connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden. Control or effective disruption of this area would give the Houthis enormous leverage over international shipping and, more importantly for Riyadh, over Saudi Arabia's Red Sea economic interests.

The situation is complicated by the fact that the battlefield is not as straightforward as it may initially appear. Saudi-backed Yemeni government forces had made some advances in Hodeidah and western Taiz earlier this month. Yet the Houthis

subsequently demonstrated their ability to regain the initiative and push towards Al-Mokha and the Bab el-Mandeb. The result is a fluid battlefield rather than a decisive victory for either side.

The Bab el-Mandeb Factor

The strategic importance of Yemen has always exceeded its apparent geographical significance. The Bab el-Mandeb is one of the world's critical maritime chokepoints. It connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and provides access to the Suez Canal route. Any sustained disruption would have implications for shipping, energy supplies and global trade.

The timing makes the situation even more dangerous. The wider Middle East is already suffering from disruption around the Strait of Hormuz. A simultaneous crisis at Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb could create a formidable squeeze on international energy and shipping routes.

For Saudi Arabia, the danger is particularly acute. Riyadh cannot afford to see an Iranian-supported movement acquire a position from which it can threaten Saudi territory, energy infrastructure or maritime access. The Houthis have already demonstrated their ability to strike targets inside Saudi Arabia. A recent wave of attacks reportedly wounded 73 people and targeted military and energy infrastructure, prompting Saudi retaliation inside Yemen.

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What began as a Yemeni civil war is therefore acquiring the characteristics of a regional confrontation.

Is Yemen Becoming An Iranian-Saudi Battlefield Again?

There is a temptation to reduce the conflict to a simple Saudi-Iranian proxy war. That would nevertheless overlook the fact that the Houthis have their own interests, ambitions and calculations. Tehran provides important military assistance, expertise and weaponry, but the Houthis are not merely an Iranian puppet organisation.

That distinction is important for Pakistan.

Islamabad has traditionally maintained relations with both Riyadh and Tehran. It has little interest in becoming a direct participant in an Iranian-Saudi confrontation. Pakistan's position becomes especially delicate now because it has entered a formal defence arrangement with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

The Pakistani Foreign Office has made the dilemma unusually clear. On September 10, it said that the Makkah agreement was defensive, that the three members were still establishing the necessary mechanisms and frameworks, and that it was premature to discuss its operationalisation. It also stressed Pakistan's support for Saudi Arabia's sovereignty and security while reiterating its preference for dialogue and diplomacy in Yemen.

This should not necessarily be interpreted as Pakistan having second thoughts about the agreement. Rather, it may indicate that Pakistan is being very careful about what the agreement commits it to do and, equally importantly, what it does not commit it to do. There is a significant difference between promising to defend Saudi territory and promising to fight a war inside Yemen.

Pakistan has bitter experience of the dangers of military involvement in other people's civil wars. Yemen's geography, tribal politics and fragmented political landscape make it an especially unattractive theatre for an expeditionary campaign.

Egypt's Yemen Lesson

History provides Pakistan and Saudi Arabia with a powerful warning. When Egypt intervened in the Yemeni civil war in 1962 in support of the republican government, Gamal Abdel Nasser gradually committed a substantial military force to the conflict. Egyptian troops became deeply involved in a difficult counter-insurgency campaign in mountainous Yemen, facing royalist forces supported by Saudi Arabia and other external actors.

The intervention became an expensive and protracted commitment for Egypt. By the time of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Egyptian forces had considerable experience and resources tied up in Yemen.

It would, however, be too simplistic to argue that Egypt lost the 1967 war because its forces had been diverted to Yemen. The causes of the Egyptian defeat were much broader, including strategic and operational failures and the enormous disparity created by Israel's surprise air offensive. But Yemen unquestionably imposed an additional military and political burden on Egypt at precisely the wrong time.

The historical lesson is therefore not that Yemen caused Egypt's defeat. It is that Yemen has a remarkable capacity to consume the resources of outside powers without necessarily producing a decisive political outcome. That is the real warning for Saudi Arabia.

Yemen: The Graveyard of Outside Ambitions?

Yemen has repeatedly attracted outside powers because of its strategic position. During the Cold War, North and South Yemen became arenas for competing regional and international interests. The conflict involved not merely Yemenis but also Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Soviet Union and other external actors.

The irony is that Yemen's strategic importance has increased while its ability to absorb external intervention has remained unchanged.

Mountains, tribal loyalties, competing political authorities, ideological divisions and a fractured security environment make Yemen an exceptionally difficult country to control militarily.

The Saudis discovered this during their earlier intervention. The United States and its partners have struggled to eliminate the Houthi threat through air and maritime power. Iran has demonstrated that relatively modest investment in a capable proxy can produce disproportionate strategic effects.

For all these reasons, Yemen can become a quagmire for anybody who enters it with the intention of solving the problem militarily.

The Makkah Alliance's Dilemma

This is where Yemen could become the first real test of the Makkah alliance. Suppose Houthi attacks continue against Saudi Arabia. Suppose Saudi infrastructure comes under sustained attack. Suppose the Houthis consolidate their position around the Bab el-Mandeb and threaten Saudi Red Sea interests.

At what point does a Houthi attack become an “armed attack” under the Makkah agreement? And, more importantly, what form does the collective response take? Does Pakistan deploy combat aircraft? Air-defence systems? Naval assets? Intelligence and surveillance capabilities? Logistics? Trainers? Or does it limit itself to defending Saudi territory?

These are not semantic distinctions. They determine whether the Makkah agreement becomes a genuine collective-defence arrangement or remains primarily a political and deterrent framework.

Pakistan's present caution may therefore be entirely rational. Islamabad does not have to choose between abandoning Saudi Arabia and entering a Yemeni ground war. There is considerable space between the two positions.

Pakistan could, for example, help strengthen Saudi air and missile defence, provide intelligence and surveillance assistance,

support maritime security, reinforce training and logistics, and contribute to the protection of Saudi territory without committing Pakistani ground forces to Yemen.

Such an approach would be consistent with the defensive character that Islamabad has repeatedly attributed to the Makkah agreement.

A Test of the Alliance and its Limits

There is another possibility. The very existence of the Makkah alliance could deter Saudi Arabia from taking the kind of unilateral military action that might otherwise escalate the conflict. That would be a useful achievement in itself.

A successful alliance is not necessarily one that fights a war. Sometimes its greatest contribution is to convince adversaries that aggression will carry unacceptable costs while simultaneously giving its members the confidence to pursue diplomacy.

Pakistan appears to favour precisely such an approach.

Islamabad has already communicated Saudi concerns to Iran and urged Tehran to restrain the Houthis. At the same time, Pakistan continues to emphasise a diplomatic solution to Yemen.

This is classic Pakistani balancing: stand firmly with Saudi Arabia on its security while avoiding an unnecessary direct confrontation with Iran.

Pakistan's Real Calculation

It would therefore be premature to conclude that Pakistan is having second thoughts about the Makkah alliance. There is, however, evidence that Islamabad wants to *define its obligations before the alliance acquires a momentum of its own*.

The Foreign Office's statement that the agreement is still being translated into mechanisms and institutional frameworks is significant. The agreement provides the political umbrella; the command arrangements, rules of engagement, force commitments, decision-making procedures

and activation mechanisms will determine what the umbrella actually means. Yemen has arrived before those mechanisms have been fully established.

That is precisely why the present crisis is so important.

If the Houthis continue their advance towards the Bab el-Mandeb and simultaneously intensify attacks on Saudi Arabia, the Makkah alliance will have to confront its first serious operational question far sooner than its architects might have expected.

The alliance should resist the temptation to let Yemen define it.

Saudi Arabia has legitimate security concerns. Pakistan has a treaty commitment. Türkiye has its own regional ambitions and capabilities. But none of these countries should underestimate the ability of Yemen to turn a limited intervention into an open-ended war.

The Egyptian experience offers a sobering precedent. Yemen can drain military resources, complicate diplomacy and produce unintended consequences. What begins as a campaign to defeat a proxy can eventually become a war against a country, its terrain and its political complexity.

The wisest course for the Makkah alliance may therefore be to make *collective defence synonymous with the defence of Saudi territory, not with an obligation to fight a ground war in Yemen.*

If the alliance can deter attacks on Saudi Arabia, protect its territory and maritime interests, prevent the conflict from spreading and simultaneously create space for diplomacy, it will have passed its first test. If, on the other hand, it is drawn into Yemen's labyrinthine civil war, history suggests that the Houthis may not be the only ones celebrating.

Yemen has swallowed the ambitions of stronger powers before. The Makkah alliance should be careful not to become its next victim.

