It is still unclear what the end of the Saudi-led air campaign that made up “Operation Decisive Storm” or “Determined Storm” really means. The shift to a campaign called “Operation Hope Restore” would seem to emphasize some form of political settlement and effort to deal with the humanitarian crisis caused by Yemen’s civil war, the air campaign, and the deployment of naval forces, but this is still unclear.

This raises far broader strategic issues than the immediate nature of military intervention in Yemen. It illustrates far broader strategic problems in fighting counterinsurgency and other military campaigns in failed states. No campaign can succeed that does not blend military action with some form of effective stability operations bordering on nation building. This is a challenge that goes far beyond Yemen and that every headline shows is just as real in cases like Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

The Uncertain Transition from “Operation Decisive” Storm” to “Operation Hope Restore”

According to the Saudi US Relations Information Service (SUSRIS) the Coalition Forces' spokesman, Saudi Brig. Gen Ahmed Asiri, announced the end of “Decisive Storm” on April 21st (the 27th day of the campaign). He said that Decisive Storm was a response to President Hadi’s request, and:

...was launched to achieve specific military objectives of this campaign which are protection of the Yemeni legitimacy and deterring the Houthi operations from continuing operations threatening the Yemeni citizens and destroying its military capabilities which they seized from the Yemeni army and which were accumulated during the past years as well as preventing the Houthi militias from threatening the kingdom and neighboring countries.

He added that Determination Storm focused on specific objectives, including controlling the airspace in Yemen and preventing the Houthi militias and their supporters from using the air forces or any other air means against the coalition operations, destroying anti-air defense operations controlled by the Houthi militias and destroying the command and control centers from which operations are run, stressing that the coalition forces controlled the airspace in the first fifteen minutes of the operation.

Brig Asiri explained that the operations continued against axes of ballistic missiles, logistics, supply, movements, ammunition stores, maintenance and manufacturing primitive workshops that they had, the sea embargo and prevention of ground operations. He stressed preventing the Houthi militias from entering and controlling the city of Aden as the operations were carried out with high precision and careful planning. He said that the operations were successful and without injuries with respect to air operations with
the exception of one plane that faced a technical glitch that was announced at the time of the accident.

 Brig Asiri added that the operations were punctual and hit their targets in terms of the volume of sorties carried out, pointing out that during the past two days, coalition forces carried out 2,300 sorties, and today, we confirm reaching 2415 sorties whose goal was to implement the air campaign in a focused manner and setting the goals that were achieved accurately on the ground, pointing out that the announcement of the command of the alliance today to end the Determination Storm’s operations came at the request of the Yemeni president who felt that the main objectives of the Determination Storm have been achieved on the ground and that the legitimacy was protected and that the Yemeni citizens are no longer in jeopardy as they were in the early days.

It is striking that he made no mention of Iran; the impact of the campaign in giving Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula access to new territory, an air base, and captured military equipment; and that the civil war in Yemen was as much a struggle between Sunnis as one between the Shi’ite Houthi and Yemeni Sunnis. President Hadi was opposed by Saleh – the former dictator, the Yemen security forces divided or simply abandoned their posts, and there was a rebirth of all the long tensions between factions supporting “north” Yemen and those favoring autonomy or independence for the “south.”

The focus on the Houthi also ignored estimates like those of the CIA that Yemen’s sectarian, tribal, and regional divisions and problems were driven by many different causes, and that Shi’ites as a while made up some 35% of Yemen’s total population – and involved far more than the Houthi alone.

General Asiri also left the character and purpose of “Operation Hope Restore” vague and uncertain. The SUSRIS reported that:

Brig. Asiri confirmed that the operations will continue with respect to humanitarian and relief work and evacuation when the leadership of the coalition feels that there is a need for military action to achieve the humanitarian and relief work and evacuation.

Brigadier Asiri explained that all operations that had been carried out today were in support for the work of the People’s Committees and resistance in Saada, Aden, Sana’a and Hodeidah, stressing that the continuation of the work in achieving the goals and management on the part of the command of the coalition to protect civilians in the city of Aden and target any operational attempts of the Houthi militias.

He stressed the continuation of work on the ground level to protect the southern borders of the kingdom by the Saudi land forces and the Saudi border guards in the protection, carrying out their duties and responding to any attempts to influence the safety and security of the borders in addition to implementing the sea embargo on the Yemeni territorial waters and ports by the coalition command through visiting and inspecting ships to make sure that they are consistent with UN resolution 2216, which prevents
arming the Houthi militias or any country or party from arming the ousted President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the groups loyal to him.

The coalition spokesman noted that Operation Determination Storm culminated in success highlighting unity of all countries participating in the coalition and the precision of planning and coordination and courageous fighters of the air, sea and ground forces and border guards, indicating that the final warehouse that could be controlled by the Houthis has been destroyed, and pointing out that the work will continue when it is proved to the command of the coalition that these militias are more or less trying to target its operations through the operation to restore hope to Yemen.

He said that the evacuation and humanitarian action cell will continue to carry out their duties to achieve the third goal of Hope Restore operations through communication on the numbers and site, pointing out that everyone is trying to bring hope to the Yemeni citizens, restore security and stability to Yemen and achieve the goals of Operation Hope Restore.

War in a Long Failed State

This Saudi announcement of the end of “Operation Determined Storm” came after sharply growing criticism of the Saudi bombing program in terms of casualties – roughly estimated at around 1,000 dead and 3,000 wounded, claims that some 12 million of Yemen’s 26 million people faced problems in terms of food and security, and warnings that a combination of the impact of the bombing and naval “blockade” were crippling an already fragile the economy.

Quite correctly, outside critics pointed out that a bombing campaign could not by itself change the internal political structure of Yemen, force unity on the country, or force any of its non-state actors to restore Hadi, reject outside influence like that of Iran, or guarantee stability in the future. Such criticism did ignore the fact Saudi Arabia had generations of experience in trying to use aid and political contacts to influence Yemen, and that the bombing might be tied to quiet negotiating efforts, but was certainly correct in pointing out that no air campaign alone could be decisive.

At the same time, much of the criticism of the Saudi effort also made no mention of the fact that Yemen had become a failed state long before the coalition air campaign began, had long seen growing internal violence, and was in an active state of civil war. The casualties and economic impact of the air campaign was generally reported totally out of the broader context of ongoing casualties from other fighting and the steady deterioration of security and economic conditions since 2011, as well as without any regard to what would have happened without the air campaign.

The CIA reported long before the Houthi displaced Hadi that,

...The unrest that began in early 2011 caused GDP to plunge almost 11% in that year. Availability of basic services, including electricity, water, and fuel, has improved since the transition, but progress toward achieving more sustainable economic stability has
been slow and uneven. Yemen continues to face difficult long-term challenges, including declining water resources, high unemployment, severe food scarcity, and a high population growth rate. The Yemeni Government regularly faces annual budget shortfalls. In July 2014, the government eliminated some fuel subsidies that accounted for approximately 25% of government spending in 2013; and in August 2014, the IMF approved a three-year, $570 million Extended Credit Facility for Yemen. Declining security continues to hinder economic growth and the provision of government services.

The CIA also reported a per capita income level of only $3,400 before the new round of fighting, a total that ranked 178th in the world, and compared to $52,800 for its neighbor Saudi Arabia, which ranked 20th in the world and had a per capita income some 16 times higher. The CIA reported direct unemployment as 27% - an extraordinary percentage in a near subsistence economy where indirect unemployment is usually a driving factor. While it could not update many of its key estimates of Yemen’s economic progress, its most recent estimate of the poverty level – 54% which dated back to 2003 – seemed optimistic in terms of Yemen’s current level even before the new fighting.

The World Bank provided an even grimmer summary of the civil strife and fighting that was a prelude to Operation Decisive Storm and its economic effects, and it too did not begin to assess the full economic and social impact of the fighting before the air campaign started. The World Bank had to suspend all missions to Yemen as of January 23, 2015 – effectively denying it access to economic and security data as well as the ability to distribute and manage aid.

... in September 2014, the political crisis was reignited and the security situation significantly deteriorated, when Houthis, involved in a decade-long conflict with the Government of Yemen (GoY) for more control in the country’s northern Sa’ada Region, capitalized on an unpopular decision by the GoY to reverse fuel subsidies, and launched several protests in Sana’a. After a short war that ended with Houthi armed militia entering Sana’a, a Peace and National Partnership Agreement was signed on September 21, 2014 calling for renewed commitment to the implementation of the outcomes of the National Dialogue, to be led by a new Prime Minister and a new technocratic government. The security situation temporarily improved following the signing of the agreement, but Houthi militia continued to hold positions at major check points and stayed in control of key government offices and military posts.

Since mid-January 2015, the political crisis has been deteriorating progressively. A Houthi offensive in the capital on January 19-20, 2015 resulted in the resignation of President Mansour Hadi and his cabinet while under house arrest on January 22. Houthis subsequently announced the dissolution of the Yemeni Parliament and the creation of an 18-member “security commission” to rule over the country until the establishment of a 551-member National Transitional Council. In late February, President Hadi escaped from house arrest in Sana’a and has since started taking steps to form a new interim government to run the country’s affairs from the southern city Aden, annulling his resignation in a statement, declaring all actions taken by Houthis since their seizure of Sana’a in September 2014 invalid and unconstitutional.
The power struggle between Houthi forces and those loyal to President Hadi further escalated in March 2015 amid deepening political tensions and an uptick in sectarian violence. There continues to remain a high threat of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) or other extremist groups taking advantage of the situation. In late March, two suicide bombers targeted mosques in Sana’a during Friday prayers killing at least 126 people and wounding scores of others. Large-scale armed conflict continued outside the capital. Following the Houthi offensive to capture crucial installations in Taiz and Aden, a coalition of 10 countries, including Saudi Arabia and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, launched a military campaign in Yemen against al-Houthi rebels.

Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Arab world. Poverty, already increasing prior to the latest political crisis, has risen further from 42% of the population in 2009, to 54.5% in 2012. Yemen has one of the highest population growth rates in the world and is one of the most food insecure countries globally. Approximately 45% of the population is food insecure and Yemen’s scarce water resources are far below the regional average.

The difficult political and security situation in Yemen continues to weigh heavily on economic activity and Yemen’s economic recovery is highly vulnerable. After the country slipped into recession in 2011 with GDP shrinking by 12.7%, the economy grew by an estimated 4.8% in 2013, but the growth rate is projected to fall to less than 2 percent in 2014. Economic recovery is confronted with several structural challenges; Yemen’s is an oil-based economy with high unemployment and weak governance and institutional structures. In August 2014, Yemen had launched an ambitious economic reform program focused on removal of fuel subsidies, advancing civil service reforms, and enhancing the country’s social safety net. Economic prospects will depend on progress on the political and security fronts and implementation of these critical reforms.

It is equally important to point out that Yemen’s political crisis had led the World Bank to rate Yemen as having some of the worst governance indicators in the world long before the current round of fighting or even the upheavals that began in 2011, that its level of political violence had reached the worst possible World Bank rating by 2009, that government effectiveness was only marginally above a 10 percent rating, rule of law was similar, and control of corruption was below 10 percent.

The Hadi government had made some slight improvements over Saleh, but was still at a failed state level before the crisis with the Houthi – in large part because of Sunni infighting. More broadly, the UN rated Yemen’s ranking in human development indicators as less than half those of another developing state like Morocco, and only marginally higher than those of Sudan.

The Strategic Lessons of Yemen:
“Win Hold and Build” and “Nation Building” in Failed State Warfare

In blunt terms, it makes no sense to focus on the Saudi-led bombing campaign taken out of context than it does to focus on one aspect of military operations in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, or any other state where the conditions of governance, population pressures,
sectarian and ethnic divisions, and economic conditions have effectively created failed states, civil wars, and major humanitarian crises.

It is true that Yemen’s problems do not have a military solution alone. It is equally true, however, that no broader approach can be effective without some degree of security and stability. Like Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Somalia, the collapse or implosion of failed states creates a level of civil conflict that goes far beyond either the tactical level of counterinsurgency or counterinsurgency on a national level. Stability, security, and progress can only be achieved and sustained through a combination of warfare and nation building.

This may not be a popular conclusion at the national political level in the United States, and little about the U.S. experience in Afghanistan and Iraq shows even a minimal level of U.S. competence in combining the two. The fact remain, however, that the U.S. mantra for counterinsurgency – “win, hold, and build” – takes on a fundamentally different meaning which is the underlying cause of insurgency is the broader collapse or failure of the overall structure of the state.

The causes run far deeper than any given movement – Houthi, Islamic State, the Assad regime, etc. Defeating one set of insurgents at best tends to produce a temporary authoritarian “peace” while laying the groundwork for future and often more intense upheavals. Winning limited tactical victories can only defeat a particular threat at a particular time, even if it is possible to “hold” the limited area where that threat operated, and find some form of limited “build” or progress in governance and economics that will achieve local stability for a while.

Accordingly, the key question now for Yemen and the Saudi-led coalition there is the same as the lessons for Libya and Syria, and that the United States had long faced in Iraq, and Afghanistan. Is it possible to find a practical solution to both warfighting and nation building?

The United States and others need to be very careful about criticizing the Saudi effort in both “Operation Decisive Storm” and “Operation Hope Restore” unless they have some such solution. This is particularly true given the uncertain progress in Iraq and Afghanistan and humanitarian nightmares in Libya and Syria.

So far, the United States has not shown it can give friendly regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan the mix of civil-military support they need or that the United States is even willing to fully address the scale of their problems. The answer – such as it is – in Libya and Syria seems to be the hope that a mix of containment and burnout will somehow make up for the failure of meaningful outside intervention.

In short, the key lesson of Yemen – and it is scarcely unique – is the need to either find broader solutions to dealing with failed states, or accept the fact that military action alone can only achieve limited and temporary objectives. The strategic challenges of warfare in failed states must either address the broader reasons for those failures, or run a critical risk of becoming failed wars.
Note: A graphic summary of the challenges Yemen faces – “Yemen as a Failed state” is available here.

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