Yemen slaughter escalates as regional powers exchange threats

Thomas Gaist
13 April 2015

The US-supported Saudi-led coalition is escalating its nearly three week long air assault against Yemen, worsening an already catastrophic humanitarian situation on the ground, UN officials said over the weekend.

At least eight civilians were killed Sunday by Arab coalition strikes against Yemen's southern province of Taiz. The attacks destroyed residential areas near a military base, a local government source said.

Arab League planes also bombed targets in the Red Sea port of Hodaida Saturday. Saudi coalition air forces have launched more than 1,200 strikes against Yemen since March 26, leaving hundreds of Yemeni civilians dead and turning tens of thousands more into refugees.

"The intensity of the air strikes has increased considerably. There are still reports about fierce fighting in residential neighborhoods, and military operations are covering entirely new territory," the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs stated this weekend.

Saudi-led naval forces are imposing a blockade on Yemeni airspace and port facilities, in preparation for a full-scale ground invasion.

"At the appropriate time, we will take action on the ground," Saudi General Ahmed al-Assiri vowed to reporters on Saturday.

What was already the poorest country in the Arab world faces deepening shortages of medical supplies, electricity, water and basic foodstuffs. Several day-old corpses now litter the streets of Yemen's southern port city of Aden, along with garbage accumulating amidst the breakdown of basic social functions, according to local officials.

Mass evacuations of hundreds of civilians have continued, with nationals from Sudan, Ethiopia, the United States, South Korea, Nigeria, Syria, Indonesia and a number European countries boarding emergency flights out of the country over the weekend. At least 900 refugees have fled across the strait to Somalia during the past week, according to the UN's refugee agency.

The multi-sided civil war was unleashed by the overthrow of the US-backed government by tribal-based militant groups, beginning with the seizure of the capital at Sanaa by Houthi fighters in September 2014.

New clashes between militant groups have erupted in 15 of Yemen's 22 provincial divisions since the Saudi-led air war began late last month, involving Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), southern separatist groups such as the Southern Movement, the Houthis, and a number of other militant factions aligned with former president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Houthi fighters killed at least three Saudi soldiers along the Saudi-Yemen border Friday. Some 500 Houthis have died in recent weeks as a result of fighting along the border, according to official Saudi claims.

The US government has steadily escalated its support for the Saudi-led forces since the beginning of the war. As even CNN openly acknowledges, the Saudi-led Arab coalition, which includes the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan and Egypt, is being freshly supplied with "advanced US-made weaponry."

US support now includes deployment of US aerial re-fueling platforms, which are enabling Saudi fighters to deliver multiple "payloads" before needing to land.

The US has announced expanded intelligence sharing with the Saudi monarchy, including information tailored to support Arab coalition air strikes. "We have opened up the aperture a bit broader with what we are sharing with our Saudi companions," a US official said

over the weekend.

US and European warships are standing watch over the slaughter from positions in the Indian Ocean, just outside the Gulf of Aden.

In a joint conference with Saudi Prince Saud al-Faisal, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius declared France's full support for the war.

France is "naturally on the side of its regional partners for the restoration of stability in Yemen," Fabius said. Paris is seeking to strengthen cooperation with Saudi Arabia, and has offered to assist the Saudi government with nuclear energy development.

Increasingly bellicose rhetoric from regional leaders has further underscored the deadly severity of the political crisis and the growing possibility that the slaughter in Yemen will detonate a much larger war.

Riyadh demanded that Iran cease backing for Houthis Sunday, accusing Iran of aiding "criminal activities" of Houthis and insisting on a cessation of activities "against the legitimate order of Yemen." Neither Saudi Arabia nor the US has provided any evidence of Iranian involvement in the Yemeni conflict.

"We came to Yemen to help the legitimate authority," Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said.

Late last week, Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei accused Riyadh of organizing a "genocide" in Yemen. Pro-Saudi hackers launched cyber-attacks against Iranian TV outlet Al Alam Sunday, posting names and personal information of Iranian journalists who have covered the war.

"Think more if you are going to talk about Saudi Arabia," the hackers wrote.

The conflict is already sending reverberations beyond the Middle East into Central and South Asia. Pakistan will "have a heavy price to pay for its neutral stand in the conflict in Yemen," a top UAE minister warned Sunday, implying that Islamabad would face retaliation from the Arab powers for its failure to aid in the war.

The Pakistani parliament has voted unanimously to refrain from participation in the Saudi-led war coalition. The vote came after Saudi representatives sought to secure a commitment of Pakistani war planes and ground forces for operations in Yemen.

"The Pakistani nation has brotherly sentiments for Saudi Arabia and UAE. But the threats by the UAE minister are unfortunate and a matter of concern," a Pakistani official speaking for the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said in response to the UAE's threats.

Saudi official Sheikh Saleh bin Abdulaziz visited Islamabad Sunday for an emergency meeting to discuss Yemen and the regional crisis.