

A Game of Chicken in the Gulf of Aden



USS Theodore Roosevelt CVN-71 and USS Normandy (CG-60) Arabian Sea April 21, 2015

Source: Reuters/US Navy

On the morning of April 21, 2015, newspapers and media reporters [trumpeted](#) a headline that the Saudis were ending their month long air campaign against Houthi rebels in Yemen. The halt reflected [concerns](#) of the Obama Administration over the deteriorating situation in Yemen and the increasing role of Iran. The operation, named “Decisive Resolve”, allegedly led by the Saudi coalition with US administration backing, had destroyed a missile base, armored vehicles, and planes held by Houthi forces. The Houthi militias were allegedly allied with Yemeni strongman and former president of Yemen for over thirty years, 73-year old [Ali Abdullah Saleh](#). Saleh, who has survived political isolation, sanctions, civil war, and assassin attempts, created an alliance with the Houthis, his former enemies, in a bid to return to power in Yemen. Latest reports [indicate](#) that Saleh has left Yemen, perhaps to join party members in discussions with Saudi Arabia and coalition members of the Gulf Cooperation Council about resolving the conflict.



Since the Saudi air strikes began on March 26, more than 1,000 civilians have been killed. The Saudis were seeking to restore the internationally-recognized and US-backed President [Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi](#), who served as president of Yemen from February 2012 until January 2015, when he was forced to resign after Houthi rebels raided his home and put him under house arrest. He subsequently [escaped and fled](#) to Saudi Arabia just

as the Kingdom-led coalition began an air campaign against Houthi rebels on March 26, 2015.

Only hours after the first announcement of the cessation of Saudi air strikes, Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Washington Adel al-Jubeir appeared at an Embassy press conference to announce the resumption of limited air attacks. The Ambassador [told](#) reporters:

The Houthis should be under no illusion that we will continue to use force in order to stop them from taking Yemen over by aggressive action. We are determined to protect the Yemeni people and counter any aggressive moves that the Houthis may undertake. When the Houthis or their allies make aggressive moves there will be a response. The decision to calm matters now rests entirely with them.

In view of continued Houthi fighting in the central city of Taiz and against secessionist forces in Aden on the southern coast. This phase of the Saudi operation in Yemen was named "Renewal of Hope", and was launched amid reports that the Houthis have surrounded the city of Aden on three sides. In a later press conference on April 22nd, al-Jubeir [said](#), "We will not allow them to take Yemen by force."

The Houthis quickly put out a statement seeking the lifting of Saudi air and naval operations, and offering to hold political talks under UN auspices. The defiant Houthi [threatened](#) to invade Saudi Arabia if the bombing continues.

A flotilla of nine Iranian vessels, seven commercial vessels escorted by two Iranian frigates, exited the Persian Gulf slow steaming down the Sea of Arabia towards a rendezvous in the Gulf of Aden. Nine US vessels were already positioned there. Nevertheless, that group has been joined by the USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71), an aircraft carrier capable of carrying 90 F/A-18 fighter jets and helicopters. The Roosevelt was accompanied by the USS Normandy (CG-60), a guided-missile

escort ship. They came from the Fifth Fleet base in Bahrain in the Gulf, presumably to shadow the Iranian flotilla.

The Saudis, with the aid of Egyptian naval vessels, have established a virtual blockade of Yemen preventing deliveries of food, civilian goods, and weapons from Houthi ally, Iran.

The UN Security Council passed a resolution barring the supply of advanced missiles to Yemen.

Pentagon Chief Ashton Carter made his first [comments](#) on the dispatch of the US carrier and guided missile cruiser to the Arabian Sea while on a trip to California. Carter told them that “he was not prepared to say whether the U.S. would be willing to forcibly stop and board one of the Iranian ships if it tries to cross into Yemen.” Further, he [said](#):

We have options. We’re not at that point. We’re at the point of trying to get the parties back to the table.

Still, he said the U.S. is making it clear to Iran that “obviously fanning the flames or contributing to it by any party is not welcome to us.”

President Obama in an MSNBC interview [said](#):

Right now, their ships are in international waters. What we’ve said to them is that if there are weapons delivered to factions within Yemen that could threaten navigation, that’s a problem. And we’re not sending them obscure messages – we send them very direct messages about it.

On the other hand, senior defense and military officials told *NBC News* that American warships were prepared to intercept the convoy of Iranian ships, because they were suspected of carrying weapons to Houthi rebel forces in Yemen.

Several versions of their mission have already been floated by various government offices. The White House, Pentagon and State Department have issued statements to the effect the US

carrier battle group is there to monitoring sea lanes. White House Spokesman Josh Earnest [said](#), “the principle goal is to maintain freedom of navigation and free flow of commerce in the Gulf of Aden and in the Red Sea”.

On the other hand, Pentagon spokesman Army Col. Steve Warren [suggested](#) that there could be a flight of refugees across the narrow Bab al Mandab that separates Yemen from the horn of Africa. The US naval vessels might be conveniently positioned to prevent a disaster similar to the one last weekend in the Mediterranean that witnessed over 700 people attempting to flee from war-torn Libya, drowned when the overloaded fishing boat capsized.

The stories may be inconsistent, but one thing is clear. If history is any measure, the Iranian flotilla is certain to be carrying weapons and supplies to aid the Houthi forces, not the humanitarian assistance they claim is to alleviate the Saudi and Egyptian blockade of Yemeni ports. The US administration has been clear that the shadowing US naval forces have not been given orders to enable them to hail and board Iranian vessels. They are concerned that boarding the Iranian ships might create an incident that could threaten a successful outcome in the ongoing nuclear in which President Obama and Secretary of State Kerry have invested so much effort. The negotiations the Administration appears committed to closing a deal offering so-called signing bonuses of \$30 to 50 billion in release of oil revenues.

These statements by Pentagon and Administration spokespersons reflect the quandary in which the Administration now finds itself, and they can't seem to get their story straight. In the midst of problematic negotiations on a possible nuclear agreement with Iran, which the Administration appears to want to complete at all costs, the US is also allegedly backing Saudi Arabia with both intelligence and weapons in the fight against the Iran-backed Houthi. The American position in this conflict is far from clear.

One possibility not mentioned in any of the media is the possibility that the American presence is neither to stop the Iranian ships, nor to board them, but to keep the other countries' naval officers from boarding them. The purpose of this mission would be to maintain our nuclear negotiations with Iran moving forward without the suggestion of our threatening them in another theater.

The situation in the region is extremely complicated and America's mission there is uncertain. While appearing to support the Saudi position, the US has also provided intelligence to the Houthi, ostensibly to ward off threat of a resurgent AQAP. And while appearing to be a deterrent to Iranian arms delivery to the Houthis, the massive American presence on the scene may be, in fact, a deterrent to other ships whose mission is to board the Iranian cargo ships should they approach the port in Aden.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is existentially concerned about Iranian expansion of its hegemony into Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, where Iranian Quds Force and Revolutionary Guard "consultants" have been active in expanding their control. In Iraq, they have been training Shia militia in the war against the Islamic State.

In response to the Iranian threat, Saudi Arabia has undertaken action to subjugate the restive Shia majority in Bahrain, home port for the US Fifth Fleet, and in the oil rich Eastern Province with a large Shia population. The Saudis are spending billions to complete security fences on its northern and Southern borders, and the Kingdom has reportedly mobilized 150,000 troops for possible action in Yemen.

The situation in the Arabian Sea is fluid. The latest reports indicate that despite the strong words from Iran, their ships have now turned around and are heading back toward the Strait of Hormuz. At this writing, they are reported to be heading east in the Arabian Sea, south of Salalah, Oman.

Failed US Policy Less than a year ago, President Obama hailed Yemen as a foreign policy 'success' story in its drone campaign against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. But with the fall of Yemen's capital Sana'a to Houthi forces and the flight of ousted President Hadi to Saudi Arabia, the vacuum in the country has been filled by open conflict between Sunni tribes loyal to AQAP, those units loyal to Hadi, and secessionist forces in Aden. America's precipitous and humiliating departure from Yemen was more than proof that our policy had been anything but successful.

Effectively Yemen is a failed state. When the mobs attacked it, the US Embassy closed in panic, leaving 4,000 American citizens stranded in a country that was rapidly falling into chaos and bloody fighting. The US special operations contingent decamped to Camp Lemonnier across the Bab al Mandab at AFRICOM headquarters in Djibouti. The former US special ops Yemen bases were overrun and destroyed. Without local intelligence from within Yemen, the counterterrorism drone campaign against the AQAP was effectively been shut down.

The current game of chicken on the high seas in the Gulf of Aden is a dangerous one, not the least because it is difficult to understand what the end game is supposed to be. The problem now is that the Iranian Ayatollah and his Revolutionary Guards commanders may relish such a confrontation with the US, Saudi and Egyptian naval contingents to see who would blink first in the game of chicken. Some might consider the Iranian flotilla as a possible *causus belli*. After all the UN Security Council adopted a resolution barring the shipment of missiles into Yemen.

The dangerous confrontation seems, for the moment, to be averted. Iran's ships have turned back, perhaps temporarily. We don't know why, or what their long range game plan may bring.

The irony the Administration found itself in over the looming

confrontation in the Gulf of Aden was that the US might have had to rely on the Saudis and the Egyptians, both of whom America had supplied weapons to, but over whom the US now has little to no control. The looming question is whether a satisfactory denouement with Iran would even be possible were Iran already a nuclear state.

That Iran is on the brink of acquiring nuclear weapons is no longer the question. All evidence points to this being the case, ongoing talks with P5+1 and the so-called 13 year 'deal' notwithstanding. Latest reports say that Iran is on the 'nuclear threshold' with less than three months before it has full nuclear weapons capability. The Iranian nuclear threshold concerns the Saudis, Gulf Emirates, Egypt, and Israel. Israel has not been diffident in the past about intercepting and boarding commercial vessels carrying illicit cargoes of missiles from Iran supplying proxies Hamas and Hezbollah.

In the game of chicken still being played out in the Arabian Sea, it remains to be seen whether the Obama Administration has the resolve to stare down this latest move by Iran, or is the President more than likely blink first?

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