

Saudi Arabia, Egypt prepare US-backed invasion of Yemen

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Saudi Arabia and Egypt are preparing a US-backed military invasion of Yemen aimed at pushing back the Houthi militia that has taken over much of the country and reasserting the control of besieged President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi.

Egyptian officials told the Associated Press that the three-pronged assault would come from Saudi Arabia in the north and from the Red Sea in the west and the Arabian Sea in the south. As many as five Egyptian troop ships have been stationed off the coast of Yemen. The officials said that the assault would begin after airstrikes had sufficiently weakened the Houthi rebels.

The developing assault on the Yemen, code named Operation Decisive Storm, is drawing on air support and ground troops from a coalition of majority Sunni Muslim countries in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia to suppress the Houthis, who belong to the Zaydi Shiite branch of Islam and have been backed by predominantly Shiite Iran.

The Saudi television channel *Al Arabiya* announced on Thursday that, in addition to at least 150,000 Saudi soldiers, military forces from Egypt, Pakistan, Jordan and Sudan were preparing take part in the ground invasion. Saudi Arabia has already begun massing soldiers and heavy artillery on its southern border with Yemen.

The imminent intervention of ground forces drawn from countries throughout the region will transform the civil war into a region-wide openly sectarian war pitting forces aligned with the Saudi Sunni monarchy against forces associated with the Shiite-dominated government of Iran.

Sudan's defense minister Abdel Raheem Mohammed Hussein reported Thursday that his country would contribute fighter jets in addition to ground troops which were already in route to the region. The Egyptian

government has dispatched four warships to the Red Sea in order to patrol the Gulf of Aden and blockade Houthi supply lines.

Washington was quick to declare its support for the airstrikes and impending invasion. Bernadette Meehan, a spokesperson for the National Security Council, released a statement Wednesday condemning the Houthis and making it clear that the Obama administration backed the Saudi-led assault. According to Meehan, the US was "establishing a joint planning cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate US military and intelligence support," to assist military operations in Yemen.

US Secretary of State John Kerry spoke Thursday to the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Cooperation Council states and reiterated the Obama administration's support for the assault on the Houthi rebels. A State Department official told Reuters that Kerry "commended the work of the coalition taking military action against the Houthis and noted the United States' support for those coalition efforts--including intelligence sharing, targeting assistance, and advisory and logistical support for strikes against Houthi targets."

Speaking at a US Senate hearing Thursday, Gen. Lloyd Austin, the head of the Pentagon's Central Command, stated that the US military would ensure that the shipping lanes through the strategic straits of Mandeb and Hormuz remained open during the conflict. "It is one of our core interests to ensure that we have free flow of commerce through both straits," he told the assembled Senators. Two US warships, the USS Iwo Jima and USS Fort McHenry, have been positioned in the Red Sea just off Yemen's coast.

US special operations troops were compelled to evacuate Yemen last week in the face of the Houthi

offensive, reportedly leaving behind intelligence files that have fallen into the hands of the militia.

While the French and British governments have also provided support for the airstrikes, the European Union's foreign minister, Federica Mogherini, released a statement yesterday cautioning against a military assault. "I'm convinced that military action is not a solution," Mogherini stated. "At this critical juncture all regional actors should act responsibly and constructively, to create as a matter of urgency the conditions for a return to negotiations."

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif made a statement to reporters opposing the Saudi-led operation. "Military action from outside of Yemen against its territorial integrity and its people will have no other result than more bloodshed and more deaths."

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham released a statement Thursday calling for an end to military operations. "Iran wants an immediate halt to all military aggressions and air strikes against Yemen and its people," Afkham said. She warned that military operations in Yemen would "further complicate the situation" and "hinder efforts to resolve the crisis through peaceful ways."

Saudi Arabia's ambassador to the United States, Adel Al Jubeir, speaking from the country's embassy in Washington, announced the opening of military operations late Wednesday night with jets from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Bahrain participating in airstrikes.

Bombs were dropped on locations throughout Yemen. According to local health officials more than 25 people were killed and another 40 injured in airstrikes on the capital of Sanaa. Reports indicated that many of the casualties were civilians.

Among the reported targets were the Houthis' home territory in the northern province of Saada, the Al Dailami air base, the international airport in Sanaa and the Al Adnan airbase north of the southern port city of Aden, a former base for US and European special operations soldiers. Military forces loyal to former longtime dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, who have been fighting alongside the Houthis, have also been the targeted for air strikes.

Saleh, who resigned power in the face of mass protests in 2011 and 2012, has thrown his support and

the military forces still loyal to him behind the Houthis in an attempt to oust Hadi and regain control over the country. Some factions of the Houthi rebels have called for the election of Saleh's son, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, as the next president of Yemen.

Hadi was forced to announce his resignation and placed under house arrest in January by Shiite Houthi militia after a month's long occupation of Sanaa. Hadi escaped captivity in February and fled to the southern port city Aden where he was working to marshal support for an assault on the Houthis. On Thursday officials in Saudi Arabia reported that Hadi had fled Yemen and was in the Saudi capital of Riyadh.



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