

# WHAT DRIVES SAUDI AIRSTRIKES IN YEMEN?

AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DYNAMICS OF COALITION AIRSTRIKES, HOUTHİ ATTACKS AND THE OIL MARKET

RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS



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## BACKGROUND

**6 years**  
of war

**4 million**  
civilians displaced

**200 K**  
casualties

**62 K**  
coalition airstrikes



OFFICIAL REQUEST TO THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC), THE ARAB LEAGUE OF NATIONS, THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL (UNSC), 24TH MARCH 2015

„I therefore appeal to you (...) to stand by the Yemeni people as you have always done and come to the country’s aid. I urge you, in accordance with the right of self-defence set forth in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, and with the Charter of the League of Arab States and the Treaty on Joint Defence, to provide immediate support in every form and take the necessary measures, including military intervention, to **protect Yemen and its people from the ongoing Houthi aggression** (...).

A. MANSOUR HADI, OVERTHROWN TRANSITIONAL PRESIDENT OF YEMEN

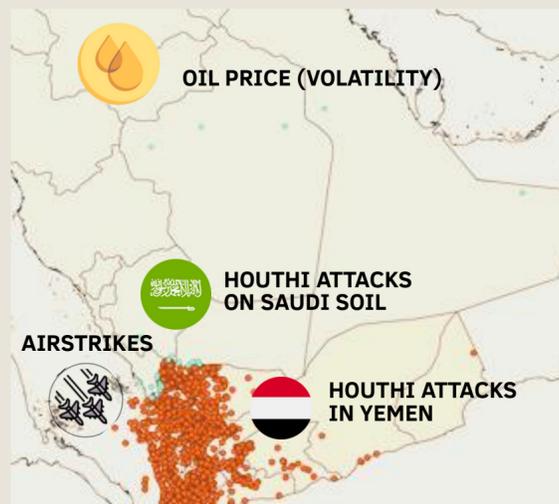


## MAIN FINDING

Our results show clearly and robustly that Saudi Arabia’s airstrike campaign is neither effective in suppressing the Houthi movement nor is its extent driven by efforts to save Yemen.

## DATA ANALYSIS & METHODOLOGY

Our study provides unique quantitative insight into what drives the extent of the military intervention. We use a vector autoregressive (VAR) model to analyse the interactions between Saudi airstrikes in Yemen, gains of the Houthi movement on Yemeni ground, their attacks on Saudi Arabian soil, and crude oil prices. The VAR approach allows us to capture complex interdependencies and feedbacks connected to political decision-making. Our approach builds on high-resolution data from the Yemen Data Project and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project for the period 03/2015–02/2020.



## RESULTS

Our results show that an increase in coalition airstrikes causes increased attacks on Saudi Arabia; however, there is no effect on the Houthi movement’s advances inside Yemen. Also, and contrary to the intervention’s official mission, increased Houthi activity in Yemen does not affect the number of coalition airstrikes. Instead, the movement’s attacks on Saudi Arabia and rising oil price volatility drive the strikes. The results are robust with respect to alternative indicators and model setups.

...LEADS TO A SIGNIFICANT POSITIVE RESPONSE\* FROM

A POSITIVE SHOCK TO...

A POSITIVE SHOCK TO...	AIRSTRIKES	HOUTHİ ATTACKS IN YEMEN	HOUTHİ ATTACKS ON SAUDI SOIL	OIL PRICE VOLATILITY
AIRSTRIKES	✓		✓	
HOUTHİ ATTACKS IN YEMEN		✓	✓	
HOUTHİ ATTACKS ON SAUDI SOIL	✓	✓	✓	✓
OIL PRICE VOLATILITY	✓		✓	✓

\*based on estimated impulse response functions

## CONCLUSIONS



- The military intervention has been unsuccessful: it has proven factually impotent to repulse the Houthi movement.
- There is no evidence that the Houthi’s grasp on the country—the official reason for the intervention—affects the extent of the airstrike campaign.
- The airstrike campaign is self-enforcing and reacts to attacks on Saudi Arabian soil and oil price volatility.
- Shape and the timing of the airstrike response suggest that retaliation, legitimacy-seeking, and increased risk-taking behaviour are crucial motives.



- Oil price volatility (and not price levels) is a significant and persistent driver of conflict.
- Decreasing prices (e.g. due to stricter climate policy) do not necessarily threaten stability, but a smooth and coordinated transition is necessary.

THESE FINDINGS SHOULD DRAW THE INTERVENTION AND FURTHER ARMS EXPORTS TO THE REGION FURTHER INTO QUESTION AND INCREASE INTERNATIONAL SCRUTINY.