

## Forgotten war — on Saudi-Yemen crisis

For the past 33 months, Saudi Arabia has been bombing Yemen with help from its Western allies, turning the country into a humanitarian tragedy. Yemen is now on the brink of “the world’s largest famine”, according to the United Nations. Already, 17 million people are dependent on external aid for food and medicine, while the country is fighting a massive cholera outbreak. The breakdown of government services, lack of drinking water and a crumbling health sector, besides the miseries of civil war and aerial bombardment, are fast turning Yemen into a failed state, and a breeding ground for extremist groups such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. The Saudis say they are fighting Houthi rebels on behalf of the “legitimate” government of Yemen led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. But the facts are more complicated. When Yemen plunged into chaos after the resignation of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012, Houthi rebels mobilised forces and captured the capital city Sana’a and western parts of the country. Saudi Arabia, which shares a long border with Yemen, was wary of the rising influence of the Shia Houthis, who it sees as Iran-sponsored militia. The Saudis formed a coalition of anti-Houthi Sunni groups in Yemen and provided them with money and weapons, while its warplanes started attacking Houthi positions in March 2015. The war has dragged on since, with Sana’a still under Houthi control.

Saudi Arabia appears desperate to change the outcome of the war. This explains its decision last month to impose a blockade on the country in the midst of a severe food crisis. Though it eased the blockade later due to international pressure, the war still rages. It is high time the Saudis and the Houthis came to terms with reality. Houthis have ground-level support among Shias and perhaps assistance from Iran, but it is unclear whether they are capable of controlling the whole of Yemen and uniting its diverse populace. On the other side, Saudi Arabia has allies on the ground and superior air power, but it has still failed to defeat the Houthis. In recent weeks, the Saudis had reached out to Saleh, whose loyalists were fighting alongside the Houthis, in an apparent bid to break the rebel coalition. But a day after Saleh expressed readiness for talks with Riyadh, Houthis claimed to have killed him on Monday, escalating the civil war. To break this cycle, all warring parties, including the Houthis, the Saleh faction, fighters loyal to President Hadi and Saudi Arabia should move towards talks. Till now, the international community has largely looked away. It cannot continue to do so. Allies should put pressure on Riyadh to cease the bombing, and set the stage for talks between the factions.

Revving up infrastructure spending is necessary, but not sufficient

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