

ESCALATION OF THE 'FORGOTTEN WAR' IN YEMEN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The new year began badly for Yemen. On January 2, the Houthis hijacked a UAE-flagged ship, *Rwabee*, in the Red Sea, alleging that it was carrying military cargo. Seven of its eleven crewmen are Indians. The Saudis retaliated with massive bombardment of Sanaa airport and then diverted a ship carrying fuel to Yemen to its own port. The Houthis have refused to release the vessel despite a United Nations Security Council resolution and have criticised the United Nations for siding with "murderers who violate international laws".

The two-year fighting to take the energy-rich province of Marib has intensified. The Houthis are just 20 km from the provincial capital, but now face freshly deployed crack troops mobilised by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – the 'Giants Brigade' that is rapidly moving north after taking Shabwa province.

The war in Yemen will complete seven years in March. As 2021 ended, nearly 3,50,000 Yemenis had died, with 60% dying because of being denied food, clean water and healthcare. Seventy-five per cent of Yemen now lives below the poverty line.

After President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in place since 1978, stepped down in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings in 2012, he was allowed to retain his ill-gotten wealth and stay on in the country. From the outset, he worked to undermine his successor, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi. Seeing the weak government in Sanaa, the Houthis, representing the disgruntled Zaydi/Shia community which had been marginalised in political and economic spheres by Mr. Saleh (under Saudi pressure), seized the opportunity to assert their claims for inclusion in national governance. The militants of the movement, Ansarullah, descended on the capital and, in January 2015, forced the Hadi government to seek exile in Riyadh.

Large sections of the Yemeni armed forces loyal to Mr. Saleh now joined the Houthis to take control of the country. This raised serious concerns in Saudi Arabia – though the Zaydis had few doctrinal or political ties with Iran, the kingdom viewed them as surrogates of the Islamic Republic on the basis of their sectarian affiliation. Saudi Arabia commenced a bombing campaign on Yemen on March 26, 2015. In 2015-21, there were about 25,000 Saudi air attacks on Yemen, with the Houthis retaliating with about 4,000 missile and drone attacks. During the fighting, Iran-Houthi ties have strengthened, with substantial military supplies sustaining the Houthi war effort.

After seven years of fighting, the conflict has now mutated into a fierce regional competition for geopolitical advantage. While Hodeidah port is under Houthi control, it is blockaded by the Saudi navy, while its Yemeni partners are ranged outside the city. Again, while Taiz is with the Houthis, forces from Al-Islah, the kingdom's Islamist partners, are in the west of the province. In the south, the UAE-supported separatist entity, Southern Transition Council (STC), controls Aden and much of the southern territory.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are now engaged in a major territorial re-ordering of Yemen. The former is seeking unchallenged influence over the strategically valuable Bab al-Mandeb strait. At its narrowest, this strait is just about 30 km wide; it links Asia with Africa and, through the Suez Canal, with Europe. Ten percent of global trade traverses these waters annually. By 2050, the value of this trade is expected to grow from \$880 billion to \$4.7 trillion, while the GDP of the littoral states is expected to go from \$1.8 trillion to \$6.1 trillion.

The UAE has now taken control of littoral ports and islands on both sides of the Red Sea – in Eritrea, Puntland and Somaliland – besides Aden and Mocha in Yemen. While initially the UAE had sought to establish a military presence in the region, its priority now is to develop the ports to make the region a major commercial hub. However, it retains its objective of protecting the area from militants and flow of weaponry, and maintains a military presence at Perim Island, at the mouth of Bab al-Mandeb, and Socotra Island, off the Yemeni coast in the Gulf of Aden. The UAE is also partnering with Israel in this area to neutralise any effort by Iran to intervene in these waters through its Houthi allies.

The Saudi geopolitical interest is at the other end of Yemeni territory – the Al-Mahra province that abuts Oman's entire southern border and also has a 560-km coastline on the Arabian Sea. This province has so far been cut off from the conflict.

The kingdom has been expanding its presence in this province since 2017 by taking control of Nishtun port, the Ghaydah airport, and two border crossings with Oman. The Saudi interest is to construct an oil pipeline from its Eastern Province to Nishtun port on the Arabian Sea, thus bypassing the Strait of Hormuz where Iran has a dominant presence. The Saudis have been pushing this proposal since the 1980s, but made no headway earlier as they insisted on placing their own security forces at a 4-km buffer zone along the pipeline. Taking advantage of the ongoing conflict, the kingdom is preparing for a long-term military presence in this province.

The fight over Marib, the last province in north Yemen outside Houthi control, will decide the outcome of this seven-year conflict. The city now has two million people and provides 90% of the country's oil and gas. With the Giants Brigade moving to the front, there could be some heavy civilian casualties. The Houthis have sought to deter the UAE-supported forces in Marib with drone attacks on Monday on an oil facility in Abu Dhabi and the airport. They have also condemned UAE efforts to control the shipping lanes in the Red and Arabian Seas to serve U.S. and British interests, and have threatened further attacks on Abu Dhabi.

Victory in this conflict will give the Houthis the financial resources to consolidate their rule over the north of Yemen, possibly resurrecting the former North Yemen that had existed before unification with the south in 1990. North Yemen then had a Zaydi majority and had been ruled by Zaydi imams for a millennium, until the republican revolution of 1962. As of now, the Houthi game plan seems to be to consolidate itself in the north, put in place a functioning administration with Marib's resources, and then seek international recognition and humanitarian assistance.

Here, Saudi and UAE interests are likely to diverge. The UAE may find the de facto partition of Yemen acceptable as it would retain its control over the southern ports and the Bab al-Mandeb strait, and manage the south through the STC it has sponsored. But Houthi control of the north will not be acceptable to the kingdom as it will view this as an Iranian proxy planting itself along its porous 1,400-km border. To add to Saudi concerns, a former Lebanese general has also predicted that, after taking Marib, the Houthis could cross the border to "liberate" the former Yemeni provinces that are now part of the kingdom. Thus, continued fighting in Yemen is the most likely prospect for the country. And, with limited interest in the conflict in the international community, this will remain a "forgotten war".

Talmiz Ahmad is the former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Oman and the UAE, and had earlier served as Charge d'Affaires in North Yemen

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