

SAUDIS HAVE LOST THE YEMEN WAR

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

Houthi fighters chant slogans as they ride a military vehicle during a gathering in the Yemeni capital Sana'a. | Photo Credit: [AFP](#)

Saudi Arabia and the UAE are allies. When they launched the Yemen offensive in March 2015, their common goal was to defeat the Shia Houthi rebels, who had captured the capital Sana'a. After over four years, they are not even close to meeting this goal, and there are growing frictions within the anti-Houthi coalition.

The Yemeni government, which Riyadh is backing, is headquartered in the southern port city of Aden and is practically operating from Saudi Arabia where the Yemeni President is residing. Aden was captured by southern separatists, who were part of the Saudi coalition, last month. The separatists are backed by the UAE, Saudi Arabia's partner. Late last month, Emirati warplanes carried out airstrikes against Yemeni government troops, backed by Saudi Arabia, which were trying to recapture Aden from the UAE-backed separatists. In practical terms, there are three power centres and multiple militias in today's Yemen: The Houthis, who control Sana'a and the northern towns, the southern separatists who are strong in and around Aden, and the internationally recognised government that is run from Saudi Arabia.

How did Saudi Arabia lose the war? Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the main architect of the war, may have thought Yemen would be a cakewalk for the Saudi troops. The Houthis lacked real battleground experience and are nothing in terms of a conventional military force against the Saudi war machine. The Saudis also enjoyed the support of the U.S., and had a coalition of Sunni Muslim countries backing them. The plan was to oust the Houthis quickly and restore the Saudi cherry-picked administration of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi in Sana'a.

But the Saudi coalition was weak on the ground. Former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the troops loyal to him joined hands with the Houthis in a tactical alliance. President Hadi, who is living in Saudi Arabia, has been anything but an inspiring, charismatic wartime leader. Within the coalition, there has been historical mistrust between the predominantly northerners-dominated government troops and the rebels in the south, who want the south to be a separate country.

The Houthis, on the other side, got support from Iran. They did not just prevent Sana'a from being recaptured, but also started attacking Saudi Arabia with short-range missiles and drones. The Saudi plan was to turn the war around using air power. But the problem is that air power alone doesn't win a war; credible allies are needed on the ground, which Saudi Arabia lacked. Its excessive use of air power has turned Yemen into a humanitarian catastrophe: thousands have been killed, hundreds of thousands displaced, and the country pushed to the brink of a famine.

When it came evident that Saudi Arabia was not winning the war, fissures started emerging within the coalition. To stabilise the country, Saudi Arabia has turned to Islah, a political Islamist party in Yemen that has roots in the Muslim Brotherhood. The UAE is opposed to it. It began betting directly on the Southern Transitional Council, the separatists based in Aden. The UAE's calculus is that even if the war slips into a stalemate, it could retain its influence in Aden, which is a strategically important port that offers access to the Arabian Sea as well as to the Horn of African coast.

The U.S. has signalled that it will facilitate talks among the multiple factions in Yemen through Oman, a neutral player. But it's still not clear what Saudi Arabia will do. The Saudis hold the key to peace in Yemen. But they are also a strategically weak point. They haven't got Sana'a. They have almost lost Aden. The government they back is practically a ghost government of militias that are on the loose. Prolonging the war is also not an option. Having no credible ally on the ground and no effective strategy to turn around the war, dragging on the conflict would only pull Saudi Arabia further deeper into the morass. The sooner the Saudis realise that they have lost the war, the better it will be for everyone, including the devastated Yemeni public.

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