



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Yemen: The Escalating War

Areeba Arif, Research Assistant, ISSI

November 18, 2016

Recently, the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Houthis took a very dangerous turn when the Houthi rebels launched a long range ballistic missile over the border deep inside the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on October 28, 2016.¹ Accounts of the missile's intended target vary: the Saudi government states that the attack was intended for the holy city of Makkah, while the Houthis claim that it targeted Jeddah's airport, which is at a good distance from the holiest of holy sites for the Muslims. After this attempt by the rebels, Saudi Arabia and many of its Gulf allies have taken this opportunity to question the intentions and belief of Houthis and their supporters. Head of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Abdullatif Al-Zayani said in a statement, "The council considers this brutal assault, which violates the sanctity of this country, a provocation to the feelings of Muslims, and disregard for Islamic holy sites, and evidence of Houthis' refusal to obey the will of the international community and its decisions, to apply the existing armistice, and tireless efforts to reach a political solution to the crisis in Yemen."²

The attempted attack on the Holy City of Makkah has created a political debate in the Muslim world and also drew a large condemnation from the Arab world. Many people are of the opinion that the present conflict in Yemen may fuel the sectarian strife in the region.

It has been almost two years since the conflict in Yemen began. Thousands of civilians have lost their lives. The deaths have not only served to fuel the anger in Yemen not only towards Saudi Arabia, but also toward their perceived patrons in Washington.

The conflict in Yemen primarily escalated in 2014, when Shiite rebels got hold of Sana (capital of Yemen) that eventually led to the resignation of President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and his ministers in January 2015. These groups are now controlling most parts of Northern and Western Yemen, along with the army and supporting President Ali Abdullah Saleh. At the same time, the international community also tried to play its role to restore the government. However, before order could be restored, Saudi Arabia started its bombing campaign in March 2015.

United States also supported Saudi Arabia. The only reason behind this support was that the United States wanted the support of Saudi Arabia to sign a nuclear deal with Iran. With this support, these coalition forces have been striking many residential areas, hospitals and many other public places which have resulted in more than 10,000 deaths during the past one and a half year. The most recent attack was on a funeral reception in which the death toll was about 150, while 525 were wounded. Human Rights Watch called the incident "an apparent war crime".³

Warships of the United States are also present in the region. The justification for their presence is that they are for the protection of the tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz from which about four million barrels of oil transit daily. A statement by the United States official after the attack was, “we will continue to defend the freedom of navigation in this critical waterway, and we will take the critical steps to respond to threats and defend our personnel and ships”⁴ The US air strikes created alarm in Iran, and it decided to provide warships to Yemen to provide protection to the Houthis residing there.

The consequences of the conflict in Yemen for the whole region should not be ignored. Iran, Saudi Arabia and other state and non-state actors are responding, reacting and capitalising on these political vacuums to further their interests. The Saudis are acting based on what many in the West have cited as an exaggerated assessment of Iran’s goals and regional reach. This internal turmoil has exacerbated sectarian tensions in Yemen. Saudi Arabia’s military intervention in Yemen has led to the regionalisation of Yemen’s war, resulting in significant implications for the region as a whole. The Saudi intervention will likely fail to achieve its goal of containing and controlling Yemen’s politics by restoring Hadi’s government. Yemen has joined Iraq, Syria and Libya in the list of states in critical turmoil. The political vacuums in these countries have furthered regional contestation. In short, the war in Yemen is a simultaneous and dangerous mix of a proxy war, a sectarian war and a result of a failed state.

US presence in this war will only serve to escalate and prolong it. The US is only helping one side in this war. The presence of US military assets in the region puts them in danger of being targeted. Consequently, the more US forces are targeted, the more likely the United States is to step up its direct military involvement in a fundamentally unjust and vicious war.

It is crystal clear that the longer it takes to settle the conflict politically, the more difficult it will become to face the ever increasing national, regional, and global security threats originating from Yemen. To begin with, Yemen was a fragile state with an internal power struggle. The Saudi intervention turned it into a regional problem, and the US intervention just made it an international issue. Given the present situation it may very well become a civil war that could span decades.

All in all, it seems Saudi Arabia wants to expel the Houthis from the region. Practically, this is impossible. The larger question, therefore, is, what can be a possible solution? Instead of fighting, a proper negotiation process needs to take place. All parties need to be brought to the table. If this is not done in the near future, this conflict, which at the moment is a conflict for regional domination, will take on sectarian facets. If that happens, then Yemen may very well become the next Syria.

Notes and References:

-
- ¹ <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1003366/saudi-arabia>
 - ² <http://english.aawsat.com/2016/10/article55361068/iran-aligned-houthis-face-international-outrage-attack-makkah>
 - ³ <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/10/08/middleeast/yemen-airstrikes/>
 - ⁴ <http://abcnews.go.com/International/missiles-fired-us-ship-off-yemen/story?id=42832766>