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Houthi attacks on the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

This essay presents a brief history of Yemen's conflict, Houthi's with the Coalition forces. This essay also aims to throw some light on how religious conflict has transformed into a security crisis for the coalition forces, particularly United Arab Emirates (U.A.E). Along with the above-stated topics, this essay also tries to understand the strategic interests of the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E) in the Red Sea and how does the recent attack on the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E) changes the scenario.

Introduction

Yemen, an Arab nation that borders Saudi Arabia to its north and Oman to its West has grown to be a probable security threat to the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E). The recent drone attacks on a civilian airport in Abu Dhabi and on crude oil storage units in Abu Dhabi's National Oil Company (ADNOC) have thrown open the United Arab Emirates' inability to counter the Houthis, who do not share any physical land boundary. Yemen is currently experiencing a civil war between the Iran-backed Houthi armed movement and the Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates led coalition forces who are supporting Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi. This war has been designated as the 21st century's worst humanitarian crisis by the United Nations. The war which began in late 2014, has caused widespread destruction in Yemen and has a death toll of around 233,000 of which some 131,000 are indirect deaths because of inadequate health services, lack of food, and infrastructure. In addition, Yemen becomes all the while strategically important nation on the Red Sea coast. On January 17th, 2022, the Houthi armed movement claimed responsibility for drone attacks on the Abu Dhabi International Airport and a Crude Oil Tanker at the state-owned Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). This raises the question of 'Who the Houthis are, what is the reason behind the drone attacks on the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E), the Yemen Civil War, and the role of other stakeholders in this conflict.' This also opens up an important question about the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) involvement in the conflict.

Background

The Houthis

The Houthis are the Indigenous tribal population, who make up 35% of the Shia Muslim community. The Houthis ruled Yemen for over 1000 years before the monarchy was toppled in 1962. The Houthis practice the Zyadism Shiism, who claim to be the rightful descendants of the Imam, which is a different form but still considered as part of the Shia Muslims in Yemen. This tribal population originates in the Saada province, the northernmost region of Sanaa in Yemen. The conflict began when the preachers of Salafists established their base in Houthi dominant areas. The Salafists were supported and funded by the state government and originally from Saudi-Arabi, a Sunni dominant nation. This threatened the Houthis and to revive their Zaydi culture, in 2004, the Houthis started revolting against the then President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, by referring to themselves as Ansarullah - “The Party of God.” By 2011, the Houthis movement gained momentum against Abd Rabbuh Mansour Haadi, eventually leading to him fleeing the country and handing over the interim government to Al-Islah Party Leader Shaykh Abdullah bin Husayn al-Ahmar.

Yemeni Revolution

The Arab Spring or the Uprising in the early 2010s against the corrupt practices of the Governments in the Middle East and uprooting of the Theocratists, in favour of Democratic and Republic governments had reached Yemen. This led to the Yemeni Revolution, eventually toppling the then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh-led government in 2012. Saleh resigned and transferred powers to Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi through a series of negotiations on 27th February 2012. By then the widespread revolution had caused a series of major civil protests, political tensions, and armed conflict in Saana. It is worth noting that despite government crackdowns the Houthis have defended themselves and managed to survive since 2004 and this took the centre stage, eventually reaching Sanaa from Sada.

At the Backdrop of the Yemeni revolution, where the Houthis led civil disobedience movements clashed with the Saleh led government forces, the fighters of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, an Islamist militant group that was regrouping in the Arabian Peninsula took control of the southern province of Abyan. In late September of 2014, the Houthis ran over Saana, seizing key government offices and buildings. This led to Hadi taking shelter in the port city of Aden. By 2015, there were numerous confrontations between the government forces and the Houthis. Meanwhile, Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi, led his government occasionally from Oman and Saudi Arabia.

Current situation and the Attack

The attack on 17th January 2022 on United Arab Emirates' Oil facility and a construction site at a civilian airport, came as a surprise. It is considered retaliation for the Giant Brigades' takeover of the region of Shabwa governorate and pushing the Houthis back into Marib. Earlier the Houthis in late 2021 and early 2022 took control of three provinces in northern Shabwa and large parts of Marib. The governorate of Shabwa and Marib are the only two major provinces containing oil and gas fields in Yemen. Taking control of these regions would mean self-sufficiency to the Houthis. The Houthis claimed responsibility for the attack, adding that the recent peace deal, the 'Abraham Accords' brokered by the United States was a threat to their brothers in Palestine who were attacked by Israel, a strategic partner of the United States of America.

Figure: 1

Lines of Control in Yemen



As of October 11, 2021, based on map from Risk Intelligence.
 Areas are approximate and subject to change.

| | Areas of influence | City Control |
|--|--|---|
| Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) | <div style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #4CAF50; border: 1px solid black;"></div> <div style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #C8E6C9; border: 1px solid black; margin-left: 5px;"></div> Sparsely populated | <div style="display: inline-block; width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #4CAF50; border-radius: 50%; border: 1px solid black;"></div> |
| Houthi Forces | <div style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background-color: #FFC107; border: 1px solid black;"></div> | <div style="display: inline-block; width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #FFC107; border-radius: 50%; border: 1px solid black;"></div> |
| UAE-backed Southern Transition Council (STC) | | <div style="display: inline-block; width: 10px; height: 10px; background-color: #2196F3; border-radius: 50%; border: 1px solid black;"></div> |
| Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) | <div style="display: inline-block; width: 15px; height: 15px; background: repeating-linear-gradient(45deg, transparent, transparent 2px, black 2px, black 4px); border: 1px solid black;"></div> | <div style="display: inline-block; width: 10px; height: 10px; border: 1px solid black; border-style: dashed;"></div> = Contested |

Sources: Graphic created by CRS using data from Risk Intelligence (2021); Esri (2017 & 2018); NOAA (2018); USGS (2018); Department of State (2015) (“Yemen: Recent Terrorism Designations - Congress”)

United Arab Emirates' Strategic Interests in Yemen:

In March 2015, Saudi Arabia declared the beginning of military operations in Yemen, through a coalition of countries. A notable one is the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E). The role of the United Arab Emirates in the military operations came as a surprise since Yemen and the United Arab Emirates do not share a land border. This is explained by its three strategic interests in the Red Sea Region.

First, the United Arab Emirates wants to be a regional and strategic ally, this led Saudi Arabia to seek its help to fight the armed Houthis. As Yemen is engulfed in a civil war, Al-Qaeda has ignited its offensive against the coalition forces. The United Arab Emirates' assistance to the United States in combating AL-Qaeda in Yemen, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant further strengthens its position to be a regional ally. This comes at a time when Iran is expanding its network in the Arab Region through the Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Israel and through the Houthis in Yemen and the Red Sea region. According to the United States, the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, Iranian transfer of technology such as advanced warfare techniques and technologies, such as drone technology, ballistic missiles and training foreign militias or militants in rouge or proxy war camps violates the UNSCR 2216. There is substantial evidence on Iranian funding of the Houthis in this aggression. In a report on the Yemeni civil war by Jeremy.M.Sharp to the United States Congress, he points out the instances where arms and ammunition were transferred to Houthi rebels. One such recorded instance is quoted, "After sailors boarded it, uncovered 3,000 Chinese Type 56 assault rifles, hundreds of other heavy machine guns, sniper rifles, and dozens of advanced, Russian-made anti-tank guided missiles." all headed towards Yemen through an unnamed dhow, suspected to be of Iranian origin. (Jon Gambrell, "United States (US) Navy seizes Arms Shipment in the Arabian Sea likely bound for Yemen," Associated Press, May 9, 2021.)

Second, the United Arab Emirates' fight against the Muslim Brotherhood in the gulf and the Islah Party in Yemen is an important factor in its involvement in the war. The Muslim Brotherhood is seen as a threat by Saudi Arabia as well as Egypt. In the Arab Spring, the Muslim Brotherhood took centre stage in organising social media campaigns, civil disobedience movements against the Monarchy and various Theocracies. As the United Arab Emirates is a Monarchy, it views Muslim Brotherhood as a direct threat and designated it as a terrorist organisation. Adding to this, the

Muslim Brotherhood's main tactic is to take part in mainstream elections, which is a cause of worry, and this is the reason behind Egypt seeing it as a threat. In Yemen, President Hadi replaced his vice president Khaled Bahah with Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar. This put both the West and the United Arab Emirates in a discomfoting situation. West viewing Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar's ties with the Jihadists as dangerous and his affiliation to the Islah party and Muslim Brotherhood as extremely worrying. Alienated by Hadi's actions, the United Arab Emirates began funding local proxies to counter the Islah party, such as the Security Belt Forces and the Hadrami Elite forces. It also provided support and backup to the brigades of the Shabwani Elite forces and Giants Brigades. These forces were stationed on the coast of the Red Sea, outside of the direct control and command of the Yemen government. The United Arab Emirates also backed a group of fired Hadi officials, known as the Southern Transitional Council (STC). The STC and the local proxy militias acted in tandem to counter the Houthis on the Red Sea Coast. The Security Belt Forces and Backup Brigades acted as standing armies to the Southern Transitional Council in times of need. These were matched by the UAE's bases in and around the Horn of Africa.

Third, the United Arab Emirates' interest in the Key Shipping Route on the Red Sea is paramount. Yemen, located strategically on the Red Sea, has direct access to the strait of Bab-El Mandeb, a major strait in the Red Sea shipping lanes. The key shipping sea route of Bab-El Mandeb connects the west to the Middle East, Southeast and Southern Countries. Major powers of the world have their bases in and around the Horn of Africa. For instance, the United States of America (U.S.A), China, Japan, Germany, France, Italy, Spain in Djibouti, the United Arab Emirates in Eritrea, and the Republic of Somaliland. Similarly, Russia and Israel have one each in Eritrea. Around 10% of the world trade passes through the Red Sea. Therefore, it assumes significant geopolitical significance for the middle eastern countries where crude oil contributes to a sizeable chunk of exports. The Houthis' expansion to the south of Saana is a major threat to the key shipping lane. By controlling the southern province of Aden and Murad, Houthis' strength to block or attack the shipping lane becomes quite easy, with the UAE (United Arab Emirates) being a key target. The United Arab Emirates' strategic interest to safeguard the Bab-El Mandeb strait lies at the heart of its foreign policy. It has diversified its business model, from a mere oil-exporting country to a major business hub and a popular tourist destination. Dubai attracts a lot of business and multinational companies to invest and develop new opportunities in the city. Having control of the strategic key shipping lanes provides an upper hand to the state itself. The positioning of the proxy

forces and the Southern Transitional Council on the coast of the red sea, allowed UAE to advance two of its objectives. The resistance against the Islah Party and the Houthis as well as safeguarding the Shipping lanes and its own strategy.

Saudi Role

Saudi-Arabia plays a significant role in the conflict. By declaring a military operation in April 2015, the Saudis declared official war on the Houthis in Yemen. The main aim of Saudi Arabia in the conflict is to first reposition Abd Rabbuh Mansour Haadi as the rightful President of Yemen and end the civil war which has taken a lot of resources and inflicted civilian casualties. Secondly, Saudi Arabia seeks to be a regional ally of the United States of America. This is evident when Saudi Arabia has unofficially declared truce with Israel, and frequently criticizes Iran's nuclear program, which threaten both Israel and Saudi Arabia. Third, to counter the growing influence of Iran in the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia supplies the mammoth share of air support and military personnel in the military operation along with Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain.

In the early days of operation 'Decisive Storm,' the coalition forces including Saudi Arabia through its airstrikes and military personnel on the ground found early success in pushing the Houthis out of their newly acquired areas in the southern province, but they still hold Sanaa as their stronghold. This early success made Saudis overconfident of their defense against the Houthis hopeful to restore Hadi However, the Houthis started resisting the Saudis fiercely, this time with the help of Iran. The Houthi's attack on Saudi Arabia on May 19, July 22, July 2, and Nov 4 in the past, and as recent as March 25, 2022, through ballistic missiles and drones, of Iranian Origin, has led to Saudi Arabia's efforts in Yemen being in vain. The ongoing civil war, or to an extent the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is leading to no end. As neither side can come to a common ground. As Saudis continue their airstrikes, the Houthis retaliate against it through surprise attacks. Neither Saudi nor Iran has been able to settle their claims through this ongoing civil war in Yemen.

Conclusion

The three strategic interests of the United Arab Emirates in the Red Sea region provide a clear idea of its involvement in Yemen in the first place. The Yemen crisis or the civil unrest has proven to be an unending one and plagued by powerful nations. Yemen war is also dubbed as another proxy war or a result of another ‘cold-war’ situation between Saudi Arabia and Iran to maintain the status quo of power. Started as a civil disobedience movement against the introduction of Salafists and a corrupt government in Yemen, the armed rebellion has taken a right turn from its core interest to a worsening civil war comprising of international players. This includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the coalition forces along with non-state actors, the Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, proxy militias and Iran passively supporting, in the region. The United Arab Emirates recently pulled out its official forces from Yemen, due to the large casualties from the conflict and due to the cost of the war. It is to be noted that the United Arab Emirates maintains a sizeable proxy militia and has its Influence on the Southern Transitional Council (STC)¹³.

An UN-brokered peace deal between the Yemeni government and the Houthis for humanitarian assistance from the port of Al-Huda Yadah port, (controlled by the United Arab Emirates) to parts of Yemen has not brought any changes in the war-torn nations. Moreover, the vessels carrying the humanitarian aid have been kept waiting off the port of Al-Huda Yadah, under the pretext of smuggling weapons to the Houthis. The Houthis’ ability to target the coalition forces outside of its territory is a key point to take note of. Another point is the use of Drones and Ballistic missiles in the attack. This puts forward the new form of warfare, where the attacker or the aggressor uses passive means to attack the Victim. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs - popularly known) are easy to use, costs cheaper and are hard to detect. The recent attack tends to be a warning sign to the coalition forces of the possible retaliation by the Houthis in the event of future attacks. The members of the coalition forces are sceptical of an end to the war and are seeking truce or ceasefire agreements with the Houthis.

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