

Yemen - No Military Solution

By [Dr. Chandra Muzaffar](#)

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There is no military solution to the Yemen crisis. It is essentially a tussle for power between various political actors. The solution has to be political.

Military air-strikes helmed by Saudi Arabia, and supported by most of the other Gulf monarchies and other governments in the region, notably Egypt, have exacerbated an already volatile situation. If these governments decide in the next few days to launch a ground offensive, the consequences will be horrendous.

One, the casualties which are mounting will increase dramatically. Yemen has witnessed a great deal of death and destruction in recent years and does not deserve to suffer more pain and anguish.

Two, Yemeni society which is already deeply polarized will become even more divided. An all-out war will make it more difficult to work towards reconciliation and to restore peace in the future.

Three, any escalation of aggression on the part of the Saudi elite and its allies will tear the region asunder especially since they are projecting the Yemen crisis as a Sunni-Shia conflict. It will have repercussions for Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and even Saudi Arabia itself. These are all Arab states where Sunnis or Shias are in the majority or are a minority. Shia Iran and Sunni Turkey will also be drawn into the maelstrom.

The danger of perceiving the Yemen conflict in Sunni-Shia terms is further aggravated by a stark anti-Iran rhetoric emanating from Saudi and Egyptian elite circles which has even hinted of a foreign, non-Arab — read Persian — threat that dredges deeply ingrained sentiments rooted in the past that have always dichotomized the Muslim ummah. The implication is that Persians are manipulating an Arab tribe, the Houthis, in Yemen for their ‘imperial’ interests. One should not be surprised if the Iranian government reacts to such mischievous rhetoric.

It is against this backdrop that one should view the proposal by the Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, to establish a unified Arab military force to defend Arab identity. It is a shame that al- Sisi should forefront this idea which is in the Charter of the Arab League in pursuit of religious sectarianism when he like his allies in the coalition formed to fight the Shia Houthis of Yemen have never thought of forging a united military front against Israel. After all, it was because of Israel that the Charter conceived of a unified Arab military force in 1950! No wonder the Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu, is euphoric over developments in Yemen which he has described as proof that Iran is seeking to dominate the entire region.

It also explains why the United States government is supporting the Saudis, the Egyptians and the others in the anti-Houthis coalition. A US National Security Council spokesperson

admitted that the US was “ establishing a joint planning cell with Saudi Arabia to coordinate US military and intelligence support” in the on-going military operations in Yemen. This is yet another example of a convergence of interests between the US and Israel on the one hand and the strengthening of these interests through collaboration with other close allies, agents and proxies in West Asia such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and a number of other Arab states, on the other. The special significance of US collusion with these regional actors on this occasion lies in the fact that the US is also at the same time holding critical talks with Iran over its nuclear programme in Lausanne. It is partly because of these talks which both Saudi Arabia and Israel are opposed to, that the former has initiated military action in Yemen on its own accord out of a belief that the US can no longer be trusted to safeguard Saudi interests. In a sense, the Saudi elite has forced the US to get involved in Yemen on its side against Iran.

But Saudi intervention is not going to help resolve the quagmire in Yemen. At the root of the present conflict is the struggle for power between Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi — the President who fled Yemen on 25 March 2015 — and Ali Abdullah Salleh, the longtime dictator who was deposed through a popular uprising in early 2012. Salleh still commands considerable loyalty within the military and has been trying to make a comeback. It is reliably learnt that he has forged an alliance of sorts with the Houthis, who constitute about 40% of the population and belong to the Zaydi branch of the Shia sect. This is an opportunistic relationship because Salleh had in 2004 attempted to mercilessly crush a Houthi rebellion which was also directed against Israeli and US interference in Yemeni affairs.

This power struggle has been rendered even more complicated by the emergence of yet another actor. Since 2009, Yemen has served as a base for Al-Qaeda. The Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is a major Al-Qaeda affiliate and is the coordinating centre for operations of the terrorist outfit in many parts of West Asia, North Africa and even Europe and the US. The US has been targeting AQAP terrorists through its drone attacks which have also killed scores of innocent civilians. These drone attacks have made the US immensely unpopular among the Yemeni people. Since the Yemeni government of both Salleh and his successor Hadi is seen as a collaborator, it has also lost a lot of credibility. The AQAP, it should be emphasized, is not just fighting the Yemeni government; it is also fiercely antagonistic towards the Houthis since they are Shias.

If the US is determined to destroy the AQAP, it is mainly because Yemen, one of the world’s poorest countries is nonetheless of tremendous strategic significance. At the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, it “is located along the major sea route from Europe to Asia, near some of the busiest Red Sea shipping and trading lanes. Millions of barrels of oil pass through these waters daily in both directions, to the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal and from the oil refineries in Saudi Arabia to the energy-hungry Asian markets.” It is not just the US that regards Yemen as strategic. All the countries in West Asia, South Asia, East Asia and Europe that are dependent upon trade and concerned about the security of those sea lanes that are critical to their economies, are watching nervously what is happening in Yemen.

Strategic significance, drone attacks, AQAP, the domestic power struggle, the Sunni-Shia divide, the tussle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional influence, the Israeli game and the continuing US drive for hegemony which are all intertwined are unfolding in a corner of

the earth that is riddled with other challenges. There is a north-south divide which was not really resolved when the two parts, North Yemen and South Yemen, decided to merge in 1990. A civil war erupted in 1994 and thousands died. The uneasy alliance has held on. There are also a number of self-governing tribes.

On top of all this, Yemen faces huge economic challenges. It is estimated that 40% of men between the ages of 20 and 24 in the south are unemployed. Drug addiction is rife. Corruption is rampant. During Salleh's long rule, Yemen developed a reputation as a kleptocracy.

To bring order and stability to a nation which is in such a terrible mess, one has to persuade all the relevant players to talk to one another, to negotiate, to compromise. The peaceful, non-violent approach to conflict resolution has not been given enough space and scope to succeed in Yemen. The UN has been trying to play a role in a very difficult situation. The UN should be given full support by all the contending forces.

It should use its moral authority to demand that both sides stop fighting immediately. It should then help to establish an interim government in Sana'a of technocrats which will not only administer but also make all the necessary preparations for free, fair elections for both the presidency and parliament. An effective interim government and the entire electoral exercise under UN supervision will undoubtedly take time. But it will be worth the while if it brings to an end the war and violence we are now witnessing.

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar is President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST)

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