Yemen: When Will the Suffering of the Yemenis End?

After nearly seven years of conflict, the bloody war in Yemen, waged by Saudi Arabia at the instigation of the United States, now is threatening security and stability in important areas of the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. For the first time, Abu Dhabi airport and the Adnoc oil refinery were the targets of a Houthi missile and drone attack that killed three foreign workers and sparked a fire. The Houthis took responsibility for the attack, which they called "Hurricane Yemen," and promised further attacks on the oil-rich emirate.

Operation Hurricane Yemen marked a significant shift in the nature of military action since the Operation Decisive Storm launched on March 25, 2015, a Saudi Arabia’s military intervention in Yemen in support of the government that suited the Saudis completely and followed in the wake of Riyadh’s policies. At the time, the UAE government also fully supported Riyadh and sent its troops to Yemen, further exacerbating the suffering of the Yemenis. It is not yet clear where this Houthi attack will lead and how it will affect the course of events in Yemen. Although UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed has promised retaliation, how this will affect the course of military developments and the wider regional context remains largely a matter of newspaper speculation.

Many Arab countries, and above all Egypt, are concerned about any escalation of military action in Yemen and the possibility of it spreading to sensitive areas in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb, which could affect shipping along the Suez Canal. Speaking off the record, a senior Egyptian foreign ministry official said Cairo hoped
that neither the UAE nor its allies would consider anything as a response other than “surgical intervention.” He added that Cairo had hoped to see a political deal that could end, or at least begin the phase of winding down the war in Yemen, rather than a new phase of military action that has already severely damaged regional security and plunged Yemen into a humanitarian crisis. It should be recalled that since 2015, Egypt has confined itself to sharing intelligence with the so-called Saudi-led Arab coalition, without sending its troops to Yemen.

Many foreign diplomats, including UN officials, believe that the seven-year conflict has devastated an already difficult humanitarian situation in Yemen, inflamed political and military tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and intensified the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. According to a UN diplomatic source, there can be no political compromise in Yemen without the agreement of Riyadh and Tehran. Some European diplomats argue that there will be no end to the war in Yemen or Tehran-induced friction in Lebanon and Iraq before a comprehensive deal is struck between Iran and the West on Tehran’s so-called nuclear program. They believe it is almost impossible not to link the timing of the Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi to the twists and turns of the negotiations in Vienna between Iran and the West.

By the way, the Houthi attack came hours after UAE Minister for International Cooperation Reem Al Hashemi told Iranian Minister of Culture Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili that the UAE would welcome the visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. Even though the discussion, which took place on the sidelines of Expo 2020 in Dubai, was more of a PR event than an official invitation. It took place just months after the UAE sent its intelligence chief to Tehran for talks.

The “opening” of the UAE to Iran took place simultaneously with bilateral talks between the Saudis and Iranians, which took place in Muscat and Baghdad. But well-informed diplomatic sources say it is important to remember that despite back-channel talks, there has been an escalation of Saudi attacks on Houthi targets in Shabwa and Marib city, led by the Giants Brigade and the Guardians of the Republic units, whose fighters have received special training at the UAE military base in Eritrea. The same sources also say that while the UAE withdrew its regular troops from Yemen in February 2020 after reducing military forces in July 2019, it has maintained a political and economic presence. Mostly in the south, thanks to key players and keeping some influential forces on the ground. They argue that the Houthi attack is likely to be a response to the UAE’s role in the recent military pressure piled on the Houthis.

Karim Ahmed, an Egyptian expert on Yemen and Gulf regional security, believes it is significant that the “dangerous attack” was preceded by indirect threats made on Twitter by Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdul Salam, who has met twice in recent weeks with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. Not only is the security of its territory at stake for the UAE, but also the huge investment it has made over a decade to establish a presence in ports across the Red Sea.

Both the UAE and other countries in the Arab world do not want to see any further destabilization in the Red Sea. Cairo is perhaps most interested in peace in the region and is very much opposed to the intervention of foreign forces (whether regional or international) in the Red Sea region and the Bab-el-Mandeb zone. “We have been encouraging de-escalation during the past year and we have been inviting representatives of Yemeni political factions for talks in the hope of supporting any possible de-escalation scenario. Now, we are worried the opposite may take place,” wrote the highly influential Al-Ahram newspaper, which has good ties with the Egyptian Foreign Ministry. On the same day as the Houthi attack, Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry had a phone call with his UAE counterpart and, according to a statement from his office, expressed full support for the UAE and any possible action it could take. But the message, according to Al-Ahram, only included support for containment measures, not anything that would expand military action.

The UAE received several more calls from regional and world capitals, including Riyadh and Washington. According to an informed Emirati source, the UAE foreign minister told his interlocutors that the world needs to change its approach to the Houthis and start treating them as “another terrorist group.” According to Baleeg Mehalifi, spokesman for the Yemeni embassy in Cairo, which is affiliated with the Saudi-backed Yemeni government, “it is time for countries in the region and the world to recognize the need for a significant change in strategy towards the Houthis, because all compromises have failed.”

According to many Arab analysts, the change in strategy towards Yemen should involve first and foremost a political compromise that will prevent further attacks on the UAE, Saudi Arabia or other countries in the region. The recent attack on the UAE may serve as a reminder of the need to pay more attention to resolving the Yemeni crisis, which the international humanitarian community often describes as a “forgotten war,” even though more than 100,000
people have been killed, four million people displaced and 24 million people are in urgent need of food, medicine and shelter.

But the same analysts and diplomats warn that the conduct of the war in Yemen depends not only on the fate of the Vienna talks and the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The war also concerns a growing power struggle between regional players both inside Yemen and external rivals for supremacy in the Red Sea region, for trade lines, off-shore locations and military bases in this very important region of the world.

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