

US to review Houthi 'terrorist' label

January 27, 2021

Yemen, a country on the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, is the stage of the world's worst humanitarian disaster after more than six years of a grinding conflict that has left most of its nearly 30 million people in need of humanitarian aid. The Houthi conflict has drawn the involvement of key regional powers in the country. The Houthi rebels are fighting against the Yemeni government accusing it of widespread corruption, socioeconomic negligence of the Shias, the growing influence of Sunni Wahhabism in the country and the country's alliance with the USA.

In news: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the US to review Houthi terrorist label and end support to the devastating Saudi offensive on Yemen

Placing it in syllabus: International Relations

Dimensions

- Houthi Ethnic Conflict
- History and Cultural Aspects of Houthi Movement
- US role earlier and the new role after Biden.
- How does the conflict affect West Asian Politics?

Content

Houthi Ethnic Conflict:

- Yemen has been wracked by a bloody war between the Houthi rebels and supporters of Yemen's internationally recognised government.
- The conflict began in Northern Yemen and has since escalated into a full-scale civil war.
- The conflict has its **roots in the Arab Spring of 2011**, when an uprising forced the country's long-time

authoritarian president, **Ali Abdullah Saleh**, to hand over power to his deputy, **Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi**.

- The political transition was supposed to bring stability to Yemen. But President Hadi struggled to deal with various problems including militant attacks, corruption, food insecurity, and continuing loyalty of many military officers to Saleh.
- The rise of the **Shia Houthi rebels began to pick up momentum in August, 2014**, when thousands of supporters of the movement protested in the streets of the Yemeni capital Sanaa, urging the government to step down.
- Houthi leader **Abdulmalek al-Houthi** requested that fuel subsidies, which had been cut significantly, be reinstated.
- The Houthis were also demanding a more representative form of government that would reflect the seats allocated to political groups and independent activists during Yemen's **National Dialogue Conference**, which mapped out the political future of Yemen after its 2011 uprising.
- In 2015, they captured capital Sanaa, thereby forcing President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia.
- Upon the request of President Hadi, a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia was formed to intervene in Yemen.
- The Houthis are thus in direct military conflict with the Yemeni government forces as well as the Saudi-led military coalition, both of which are trying to push them back to the Saada Province.
- The Houthis, however, continue to capture large swathes of territories in Yemen while facing the wrath of a mighty military coalition.
- The Houthis are reportedly supported by Iran which provides them with weapons and funding.

The Tribal Dynamics of Yemen:

- The control and influence of the tribes over state

institutions remain strong even decades after the **1962 revolution in Yemen**.

- The **Al-ahmar family and Houthis** are the most powerful tribal clans in Yemen. They have been at loggerheads, the former being patronised by the government and the latter marginalised.
- The Houthis belong to the **Zaydi sect of Shias**, which comprise nearly **40 per cent of the Yemeni population**.
- The Al Ahmar family and the political party it controls, **Al Islah**, have, respectively, enjoyed unmatched tribal and political power since 1994, mostly because of their links with Saudi Arabia.
- **Al Ahmar has been using Al Islah as a platform to assert its own hegemonic ambitions** and political power grabbing.
- It has been most active over the past decades in its opposition and repression of the Houthis. It considers Houthis as a threat to its own claim in the Yemen highland.
- In the past, former **President Saleh and Al Ahmar had agreed to share the country's resources more or less equally** and had allowed Saudi Arabia to exert control over policies.
- But the **2011 'Arab Spring' disrupted this arrangement**

History and Cultural Aspects of Houthi Movement:

- The Houthi movement, officially called **Ansar Allah (meaning "Supporters of God")**, is an Islamic political and armed movement that emerged from Sa'dah in northern Yemen in the 1990s. The movement was called Houthis because its founder is from the Houthi tribe.
- The **Houthis began as a moderate theological movement** that preached tolerance and held a broad-minded view of all the Yemeni peoples. It originally held a considerably broad-minded educational and cultural

vision.

- Under the leadership of **Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi**, the group emerged as an opposition to former Yemeni president **Ali Abdullah Saleh**
- They charged Saleh with massive financial corruption and criticized for being backed by Saudi Arabia and the United States at the expense of the Yemeni people and Yemen's sovereignty.
- **Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi was killed in Sa'dah in 2004** along with a number of his guards by the Yemeni army, sparking the Houthi insurgency in Yemen.
- Since then, except for a short intervening period, the movement has been led by his brother **Abdul-Malik al-Houthi**.
- The movement's **expressed goals include combating economic underdevelopment and political marginalization in Yemen while seeking greater autonomy for Houthi-majority regions** of the country.
- The Houthis avoid assuming a singular tribal identity. Instead, the group strategically **draws support from tribes of the northern Bakil federation**.
- **Bakil federation** is a rival to the **Hashid federation** which had been a traditional ally of the Yemeni government.
- The Houthis' lack of centralised command structure allows them to generate immense support, as Yemenis from diverse backgrounds have joined their cause

US role earlier and the new role after Biden

- As a close ally of Saudi Arabia, the **USA has repeatedly interfered in Yemen**.
- Prior to the start of the civil war in 2015, the **U.S. had 100 military advisers in Yemen** supporting that government's **fight against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)**.
- During the **Obama Administration**, the United States has

provided weapons and logistical support to Yemeni government strikes against suspected hide-outs of Al Qaeda within its borders.

- As a supporter of Saudi Arabia, the US air force also launched air raids on the Houthi stronghold regions of Amran, Hajjah and Sa'ada in North Yemen.
- In 2015, The United States quietly began supporting the Saudi-led coalition by providing it with **intelligence, weapons sales and air-refueling support.**
- Former **President Donald Trump** had been a staunch ally of Saudi Arabia. He **offered U.S. logistical help and military sales for Saudi Arabia's six-year campaign** to dislodge the rebels who have taken over much of Yemen.
- President Donald Trump's administration designated the Iran-aligned group as a "foreign terrorist organisation". It also imposed a ban on transactions involving Yemen's Houthi movement.
- US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the Houthi designation on January 19, a day before President Joe Biden took office.
- **Aid organisations** working in the war-torn country had requested the US to lift the "terrorist" designation about concerns it **would exacerbate a continuing humanitarian crisis and risk plunging the country into widespread famine.**
- U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has assured to quickly revisit the designation of Yemen's Houthi rebels as terrorists and end support to the devastating Saudi offensive on the country.

How does the conflict affect West Asian Politics?

- Over the years, Yemen has become a theatre of an ongoing **proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia** as both these countries are deeply involved in the conflict.
- This has widened the gulf between the two regional powers, thus leading to further deterioration of the

security environment in the volatile Gulf region.

- **For Saudi Arabia**, Houthis capturing Sanaa comes as a direct **national security challenge**.
- **Iran's support to the Houthis provides it with strategic leverage** vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.
- Yemen's **geographical location** along the narrow Bab El Mandeb Strait makes it an **important country from the point of view of maritime security**.
- Further, the continuing **instability in Yemen** has provided a **conducive atmosphere to al Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to operate** and further expand their activities, which is a key concern for the whole region.
- Though Yemen remains an impoverished, devastated and a polarised country, the continuing **conflict has turned it into a crucial battleground that affects the regional politics and security in the Gulf**.

Mould your thought: Yemen's current predicament with large-scale humanitarian emergencies, coupled with presence of terrorist groups, could have serious consequences for the entire region. Evaluate

Approach to the answer:

- Introduction
- Write about the crisis in Yemen
- Write about the strategic importance of Yemen
- Write about the effect of crisis on the geopolitics of the region
- Conclusion