Escalation of the Forgotten War in Yemen

What is the issue?

The war in Yemen will complete seven years in March. As 2021 ended, nearly 3,50,000 Yemenis had died, with 60% dying because of being denied food, clean water and healthcare.

How the Yemen War started?

- After President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepped down in the wake of the **Arab Spring uprisings** in 2012, he worked to undermine his successor, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi.
- The Houthis, representing the disgruntled Zaydi/Shia community which had been marginalised in political and economic spheres by Mr. Saleh seized the opportunity to assert their claims for inclusion in national governance.
- The militants of the movement, Ansarullah, descended on the capital and in 2015, forced the Hadi government to seek exile in Riyadh.
- Large sections of the Yemeni armed forces loyal to Mr. Saleh now joined the Houthis to take control of the country.
- Between 2015-21, there were about 25,000 Saudi air attacks on Yemen, with the Houthis retaliating with about 4,000 missile and drone attacks.
- During the fighting, Iran-Houthi ties have strengthened, with substantial military supplies sustaining the Houthi war effort.

How has the war shaped the West Asian geopolitics?

- The conflict has now mutated into a fierce regional competition for geopolitical advantage.
- **Houthi**-While Hodeidah port is under Houthi control, it is blockaded by the Saudi navy, while its Yemeni partners are ranged outside the city.
- Taiz is with the Houthis, forces from Al-Islah, the kingdom's Islamist partners, are in the west of the province.
- **STC** -In the south, the UAE-supported separatist entity, Southern Transition Council (STC) controls Aden and much of the southern territory.

- **UAE**- The UAE is seeking unchallenged influence over the strategically valuable Bab al-Mandeb strait.

  Bab al-Mandeb strait is just about 30 km wide at its narrowest linking Asia with Africa and, through the Suez Canal, with Europe. 10% of global trade traverses these waters annually.

- Initially the UAE had sought to establish a military presence in the region but now its priority is to develop the ports to make the region a major commercial hub.
- The UAE is also partnering with Israel in this area to neutralise any effort by Iran to intervene in these waters through its Houthi allies.
- **Saudi Arabia-** The Saudi geopolitical interest is at the Al-Mahra province that borders Oman's entire south and has a 560-km coastline on the Arabian Sea.
- The kingdom has been expanding its presence in this province since 2017 by taking control of **Nishtun port, the Ghaydah airport,** and two border crossings with Oman.
- The Saudi interest is to construct an oil pipeline from its Eastern Province to Nishtun port on the Arabian Sea, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz where Iran has a dominant presence.
- **Fight over Marib**- Marib is the last province in north Yemen outside Houthi control which will decide the outcome of this seven-year conflict.
- The city now has 2million people and provides 90% of the country's oil and gas.
- The Houthis have sought to oppose the UAE-supported forces in Marib with drone attacks on an oil facility in Abu Dhabi and the airport.

What is the Houthi game plan?

- Victory in this conflict will give the Houthis the financial resources to consolidate their rule over the north of Yemen, possibly resurrecting the former North Yemen that had existed before in 1990.
- The Houthi game plan seems to be to consolidate itself in the north, put in place a functioning administration with Marib's resources, and then seek international recognition and humanitarian assistance.
- The UAE would like to retain its control over the southern ports and the Bab al-Mandeb strait, and manage the south through the STC it has sponsored.
- But Houthi control of the north will not be acceptable to the kingdom as it

will view this as an Iranian proxy planting itself along its porous 1,400-km border.
- There is also a prediction that after taking Marib, the Houthis could cross the border to liberate the former Yemeni provinces that are now part of the Saudi kingdom.
- Thus, continued fighting in Yemen is the most likely prospect for the country.

References

1. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/escalation-of-the-forgotten-war-in-yemen/article38288701.ece

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