**Wars on many fronts**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2022-01-26

LAST weekend was a moment of mad scrambling by world powers. The United States threatened sanctions against an expansionist Russia, saying that it would boot the Russians from the international banking system, as it has already done with Iran. For their part, members of the European Union squabbled over what must be done about the huge build-up of armament at Ukraine`s border with Russia. The Germans, who are involved in a pipeline project (it is complete but the pipeline has yet to start functioning) that would allow natural gas from Russia to be directly piped to their country, remained hesitant as they know sanctions would make it harder for them to have financial transactions with Russia. Was Ukraine really worth a war that all of the EU would have to fight? These diversions made it perfect for another long-standing and much more bloody war to enter into high gear. The Yemeni Houthis, who are opposed to the religious influence exercised by Saudi Arabia and want to regain oilfields they say belong to them, made their move. Late on Sunday, they were able to launch missile attacks on Saudi Arabia. It was not the first time. In Sunday`s attack in Saudi Arabia, the two men injured were among the droves of guest workers who continue to do all that Saudis themselves consider beneath them and Saudis consider a lot of things to be beneath them. The two guest workers in question were a Sudanese and a Bangladesh national.

Another attack by the Houthis on Monday targeted an airbase with 2,000 US personnel in the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi. According to Emirati of ficials, the missiles were intercepted and `fell in separate areas around Abu Dhabi`. A week earlier, a drone attack claimed by the Houthi rebels had killed three people, including a Pakistani national, in Abu Dhabi. As everyone knows, Abu Dhabi and Dubai are not cities that are considered even remotely to be a part of a war zone. Even as the Emiratis have sided with Saudi Arabia in their war against the Yemeni Houthis, and UAE forces are part of the Saudi-led coalition fighting against the Houthis in Yemen, cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi have gone on just as before, despite even the Covid-19 pandemic. The designer shops, the glittering and resplendent malls, the towering skylines have all glistened and gleamed. Tourists who follow Covid protocols have continued to fill them up, dining at Michelin star rated restaurants with the usual guest workers parking their cars and mopping their floors.

The attacks on Abu Dhabi have disrupted this usual tenor of business as usual. In Monday`s attack, Abu Dhabi residents said they heard explosions in the early hours of the morning. These werenot likely the actual missiles that the Houthis fired but the interceptors fired back by the UAE and US armed forces. The escalation in fighting has caused greater concern for the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen; the World Food Programme estimates that five million Yemenis are on the brink of famine and that 50,000 are actually starving. On Friday, soon after the first attack on Abu Dhabi by the Houthis, the Saudi-led coalition bombed a prison in the Houthi stronghold of Saada in Yemen, killing over 70 people.

These details undoubtedly will be contested by those on either side of the conflict the specifics of warfare, of casualties, of which side was able to inflict more damage on the other. One thing, however, is sure: the city states of the Gulf shining examples of the remaking of the Middle East into a commercial centre rather than only the producer of fossil fuels are not as impenetrable as it was thought. Since the firing of the missiles, YahyaSarea, the spokesperson of the Houthis, has advised foreign companies and investors to leave, saying the situation was not stable. The Houthis, he said, were prepared to `meet escalation with escalation`.

It is unknown what exactly will happen, but regional experts speaking to news sources have underscored the fact that this escalation may be a game changer. Karen Young of the Middle East Institute`s energy and economy programme, said that the attack was `absolutely an escalation` and that the `safety of the GCC now has risk calculations that approach what we know in other parts of the Middle East`, where dangers to pipelines, production f acilities, civil aviation, etc. are common.

In terms of strategy, those who have the most to lose are always the ones who stand at greater risk in any conflict. The humanitarian crisis in Yemen and the repeated infliction of casualties on the Houthis indicates that the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen may have inflicted so much harm that the former have almost nothing left to lose. So, even while the Houthis will face disastrous retaliation from the Saudi coalition, they may well be too desperate to care. For their part, one or two more attacks in the UAE, through which much of the world`s air traffic is routed, and the nature of the war would face a drastic change.

The conflict in Yemen, everyone knows, is a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The burgeoning conflict in Ukraine is a conflict between the United States, the EU and their allies with Russia. The fact that both are being exacerbated at the same time risks throwing the world into a larger conflict. In the Saudi vs Houthi conflict, America`s attention to Nato and the war in Ukraine may limit the assistance they can provide.

If this is so, then the future for the Middle East appears particularly bleak, with even those areas that have been untouched by decades of unrest being drawn into the conflict.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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