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The Yemen crisis and the West

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A place of high tensions in the Middle East, and obviously a field of armed confrontation between Sunni and Shia Islam, is Yemen. The cost of the Yemeni conflict in humanitarian terms is huge: so far the death toll has exceeded 6,000, while the wounded are more than 30,000. Several of them are civilians, while 80% of the Yemeni population is in need of humanitarian assistance.

The current crisis has its roots in 2011 when demonstrators inspired by the Arab Spring movement rose up against the then for three decades President Ali Abdallah Saleh. At the end of the same year, Saleh resigned, handing the government to the vice-president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, as a result of negotiations with neighboring countries, and so the country passed in a transitional political phase. After a period of increasing violence and a failed national dialogue in September 2014 the Houthis, rebels who belong to the Zaidi branch of Shiite Islam, occupied the capital Sana'a. In early 2015, President Hadi escaped to the south and as the tension increased the Houthis moved towards the south. In March a coalition of Arab Gulf States and Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Sudan, led by Saudi Arabia, launched air strikes against Houthi targets and imposed naval blockade on the country.

Although there are many conflicts between several different Yemeni groups, the main fight is between forces loyal to the President Hadi, and those allied to the rebel Houthis. Some of Yemen's security forces are backing Hadi, and others the Houthis and Hadi's predecessor Ali Abdullah Saleh. Both President Hadi and the Houthis are opposed by AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) and by a Yemen affiliate of the Islamic State (IS). Many of the violent conflicts are largely caused by underlying problems of unequal access to power and resources. Instability, large-scale displacement, weak governance, corruption, resource depletion and poor infrastructure, unemployment, high food prices and limited social services are factors contributing to the Yemen crisis.

There are many reasons for western concern on the Yemen crisis. Yemen is important because it is situated in the east shore of the Strait of Bab al-Mandab, a narrow waterway between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, through which much of the world's shipments pass. Egypt and Saudi Arabia fear a Houthi takeover would threaten free passage through the Strait. The West considers AQAP the most dangerous branch of al-Qaeda because of its technical expertise and wider influence; thus the threat of attacks emanating from destabilized Yemen is increasing. Another point is that the frequent Yemen conflicts are often viewed as part of a regional power struggle between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, with unknown consequences in case of an uncontrolled escalation of violence. In fact, the Persian Gulf Arab states have accused Iran of backing the Houthis both financially and militarily, although no proof has ever been presented in this regard. On its part, Iran has denied that.

A more immediate consequence is the deteriorating immigration crisis, since more than 130,000 people have fled the country so far. If the conflict is not settled down, more and more people are expected to leave the country and many Yemenis will choose to follow thousands of other immigrants and refugees seeking asylum in Europe.

The ongoing tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran has clearly escalated to levels that until recently were

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unthinkable. Moreover, the ceasefire between Houthis and the coalition has formally ended.

The EU must take into consideration that if the Yemeni immigration scenario takes place, the number of Yemeni refugees arriving at the Greek and Italian borders will continue to increase and that a more active European involvement in conflict resolution efforts may be necessary.

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