

Saudi's Stance on mediation undermines Muslim institutions

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The conflict in Yemen is a multi-sided civil war rather than a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and that needs to be recognised before mediation can be made to work. All the protagonists claim that they are fighting a regional war and a battle for influence against each other. Mediation is needed and the external parties involved in the fight must make big efforts to ensure that it is started.

Saudi Arabia is a major player in the conflict but has continued to reject any [move toward mediation](#). Its stance is becoming increasingly dangerous, as it risks undermining the credibility of all the Gulf states and of the three important institutions that were established for just such a crisis between Muslim protagonists – the Arab League, the Gulf Co-operation Council and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, which includes 56 Muslim states.

Saudi Arabia continues to call upon on the Iran-backed Shia Houthis to lay down their weapons and surrender, even though they have conquered much of the country, including the capital Sanaa. Riyadh has rejected an [Iranian peace proposal](#) and remains determined to pursue a solely military strategy to reinstate the ousted Yemeni president Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who is now in exile in Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, the fear of getting involved in a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, has been a big factor in the refusal of two close Saudi allies – Turkey and Pakistan – to send troops to join the intervention. Egypt, which is officially part of the Saudi-led alliance of Sunni states, has also refused to send troops. All three states have urged Riyadh to join in mediation efforts.

On the other side of the Gulf, Iran is pushing for a diplomatic solution. Its [four-point peace plan](#) includes a ceasefire, humanitarian assistance, mediation between Yemeni factions and the establishment of a broad-based government. What is missing from the Iranian side is a commitment not to provide more arms or war materials to the Houthis. There should be a complete embargo on any more weapons reaching Yemen – which is already the most weaponised state in the world.

Riyadh's prestige has taken another knock with the immobility of the Saudi-influenced Arab League, the Gulf Co-operation Council and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, none of which has achieved miracles of peace making in the past. Their inaction will ensure that in the future they will be rendered even more incapacitated, that the shaky Muslim unity in these organisations will disappear and that nobody will give them credit for being neutral. In a further blow to mediation, the UN envoy to Yemen [Jamal Benomar](#) said on April 15 that he would resign from his post after four years of diplomatic efforts to bring all parties to the table.

Arab and Muslim countries must show greater courage in mobilising one of these three to start work on mediating between the factions in Yemen, calling for a ceasefire and persuading Iran and Saudi Arabia to begin direct talks. The humanitarian [pressure on Riyadh](#) to ease up on the bombardment of Yemeni targets through air and artillery assaults that have allegedly killed up to 700 civilians in Yemen in the weeks of fighting since March 25 has so far failed. The 25m Yemenis now face a horrendous future without food, medicine or relief.

Tehran needs to agree that its ships and aircraft which have been landing in Yemen with supplies for the Houthis should be inspected by the UN or the Red Cross to ensure that weapons are not being carried. This could reassure the Arabs and reduce their fears of Iran's influence.

The Saudis have overwhelming firepower to bring to the fight in tiny Yemen, and large land forces. However, non-Arab officials who have been to Riyadh recently told me that the Saudis do not seem to have a long-term or clear military strategy, as they want to avoid an invasion and a land war on the country's inhospitable terrain.

The combination of a lack of a military strategy and the refusal to allow mediation could be lethal for Saudi policies, not only in Yemen but in the broader Arab world where it commands both allegiance and respect.

The Muslim world and the west must insist on a ceasefire and the delivery of humanitarian relief as the beginning of greater role for peacemakers. An endless war in the mountains of Yemen can do nobody any good, least of all the suffering Yemeni people and the wider Arab world. Saudi Arabia's internal political and economic problems could hardly warrant an all-out war at this time.

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