

THE NEW FRONTS OF THE YEMEN WAR



Situation Assessment

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مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث
Abaad Studies & Research Center

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-  abaadstudies@gmail.com
info@abaadstudies.org

www.abaadstudies.org

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Abstract

A new phase is unfolding in the Yemen war as it enters its eighth year following the Houthi coup d'état and takeover of the capital, Sana'a in September 2014. The Saudi-led coalition that was forged to support President Hadi against the Iranian-backed coup has reverted to the large-scale military operations triggered by Operation Decisive Storm in March 2015. Yet, this time the Houthis have managed to expand the theater of operations to international trade routes and the regional capital of economic stability, Abu Dhabi. This analysis discusses the new military operation and highlights the key parties involved in the offensive to fight the Houthis in the governorates of Marib and Shabwa in particular. The possibility of expanding the theater of military operations to new zones beyond the oil- and gas-rich areas, and the Saudi motives behind launching this operation will also be addressed.

The paper also discusses the Houthi drone attack on Abu Dhabi on January 17 in response to the new military operation. It attempts to answer the following questions: What repercussions does the attack have on Abu Dhabi's strategy in Yemen? How does it affect the UAE-Iranian and Saudi-Iranian consultations, and the tension in the Gulf waters? What are the repercussions of these developments on the US and international positions towards the Houthis?

Introduction

On January 10, 2022, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen launched a new military operation (Freedom of Happy Yemen) against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, seven years after the Saudi operations in Yemen were launched in "Operation Decisive Storm" in March 2015, and "Operation Restoring Hope" in April 2015.

The new operation was commenced in Shabwa governorate, whose new governor stated that three important districts: Usailan, Bayhan and Ain, were retaken from the Houthis who broke into Shabwa in September and October 2021. Regaining these districts constitutes a blow to the Houthis, who were closer to controlling Marib, the most important stronghold of the Saudi-backed internationally recognized government. So, what prompted the Saudi-led coalition to launch the new offensive? What outcomes are likely to result from the operation? What domestic, regional and international repercussions will it have?

Incentives of the New Operation

The Saudi-led coalition military operations in Hodeidah had been suspended since 2018, following the Stockholm Agreement,^[1] which remained mostly unfulfilled, except for a fragile ceasefire in relation to which the Houthis and the Joint Forces reciprocally exchanged accusations of violation. However, prior to launching the new offensive, the Saudi-led coalition covered the withdrawal of the Joint Forces from Hodeidah in September-November 2021. The motives were not clear at the time. Yet, some indicators seem to suggest the motives of withdrawing from an area of more than 100 kilometers, including:

- Saudi Arabia redeployed its forces in Aden, Socotra and Hadramout, transferring most of these forces to the Saudi-Yemeni border. Escalation of the Yemeni government and Saudi-led coalition forces inside Yemen has often been associated with a Houthi escalation along the Yemeni-Saudi border strip, in order to pressure Saudi Arabia to stop supporting the Yemeni government forces and end internal escalation. The redeployment of the Saudi forces along the Saudi-Yemeni borders came as the Houthis escalated their unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attacks on Saudi territory, using drones and ballistic missiles.

- In November, Al-Amaliqa (Giants) Brigades and the Tihama Resistance Forces withdrew from their strategic positions at the entrances of Hodeidah city, to the town of Khokha, retreating for a distance of more than 100 kilometers and from a total area of more than three thousand square kilometers. The Joint Forces and the coalition^[2] stated that the move was a "planned" withdrawal to reinforce the defenses of the areas specified in the Stockholm Agreement, and to transfer the forces to other strategic areas. However, the United Nations and its U.N. Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) in Hodeidah as well as the Yemeni government stated that they had no prior knowledge of the withdrawal.^[3] The Houthis immediately moved in. This development enraged several parties, including the Yemeni government and commanders of the Tihama Resistance.^[4] This means that most government officials, including commanders of military brigades, were not engaged in the plans drawn up by Saudi Arabia and were excluded from preliminary consultations.

- Matters were already heading towards one of two scenarios: either a Saudi withdrawal from the war in Yemen, which means the failure of the Saudi-led coalition and victory of the Houthis, or alternatively, preparation for a new offensive. It is difficult for Saudi Arabia, at least in theory, to allow the Houthis a free and exclusive reign in Yemen, which would mean countless problems on its southern borders. So, what are the motives of triggering the new military offensive?

A plethora of domestic, regional and international incentives prompted Saudi Arabia to launch the new offensive without heeding international pressure. These incentives will be dealt with in the following sections.

I Domestic motives behind launching Operation Freedom of Happy Yemen

A-The Houthi rejection of initiatives to end the war: A few months prior to the latest escalation by Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government, Riyadh proposed an ambitious initiative to end the war in Yemen.

At earlier times, the Houthis had put forward the same four points of the Saudi initiative. These four points themselves have been proposed in various UN, US and international community-brokered initiatives; namely, a nation-wide ceasefire, reopening of Sana'a International Airport, allowing fuel into Hodeidah port in accordance with the Stockholm Agreement, and the possibility of restarting direct negotiations.

These are the same points put forward by the UN initiative presented by former UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths (2019-2021). The Houthis, then, turned down Griffiths' initiative, suggesting a different arrangement of the proposed items. They demanded reopening of Sana'a International Airport and Hodeidah port as a first step, followed by a gradual cease-fire initiating with a cessation of air raids as a first step, then ceasing all hostilities on the Yemeni-Saudi border, followed by a nation-wide ceasefire. Apparently, this was an attempt to win the time needed to control Marib governorate through depriving the Yemeni army of its point of strength represented by the coalition airstrikes covering its operations.

Moreover, the failure of the Stockholm Agreement to make any breakthroughs in negotiations between the Houthis and the internationally recognized government reveals the failure of Griffiths' strategy, which is a logical result of putting forth fragmentary solutions to reach a comprehensive agreement in Yemen. The Houthis manipulated the international pressure exerted on Saudi Arabia to enhance their maneuvering power to continue fighting with the aim of scoring a victory that they believed would coerce the government and its allies to accept their conditions. Their opponents, however, view those conditions as closely related to the interests of the Iranians, the principal supporters of the Houthis. The Houthi escalation in Marib coincided with the UAE announcement of its exit from the Yemen war, even though Abu Dhabi was not serious about withdrawing, as it retained a contingent of a few hundred soldiers in Yemen, especially in Shabwa. The UAE continued to support and finance a force of more than 120,000 fighters, which it had built and trained outside the military establishment.

B- The Houthi escalation of attacks on Saudi Arabia: The Houthi escalation and intensification of UAV attacks inside Saudi territory prompted Riyadh to search for various means to stop these attacks, especially as its stockpile of air-to-air missiles was running out. It turned to the Arab Gulf states and other international allies for missiles. ^[5] In 2021, an increase in Houthi attacks on Saudi territory was recorded compared to the previous year, bringing the total number of Houthi attacks to 702 during the first 9 months of the year, at a rate of 79 attacks per month, compared to 38 attacks per month in 2020.

C- Exhaustion of the Houthis in Marib: Over the last two years, especially since February 2021, the Houthis escalated their military offensive in Marib, and sent thousands of fighters as human cohorts in an attempt to control the city, which has been the hub of military operations against the Houthis since 2015. The Houthis stated that about 15,000 of their fighters were killed in Marib battles between June and October 2021,^[6] yet they failed to advance to the city. Not only was the Houthi troops depleted in the battles in Marib, but also most of their vehicles, armored vehicles and tanks were destroyed by the Yemeni military, tribesmen and coalition airstrikes. The offensive also significantly exhausted their financial resources, so that they attempted to make up for the resulting deficit by imposing levies on merchants and citizens in their dominions.

Since 2014, the Houthis have persistently employed the tactic of launching uninterrupted offensives. Over a period of seven years, they have depleted most of their trained forces. The remaining forces they have are composed of new trainees lacking practical military experience. Moreover, these forces are undertrained, being only summarily trained for a period of 30 days. In launching their offensives, the Houthis rely on huge numbers of attacking troops, so that hundreds of fighters are collectively engaged in sudden attacks to put their opponents under numerical pressure. Such collective attacks show utter disregard to the high number of casualties associated with such a tactic.

The battles in Marib have weakened the Houthis, and depleted most of their trained troops. This encourages the Saudi-led coalition and government forces to launch the military operation to drive the Houthis away from the areas they controlled last year.

II. Regional and international Incentives

Saudi Arabia relies on regional and international variables that allowed it to launch the new military operation despite the criticism leveled at the coalition during the past seven years. These have to do mainly with regional and international transformations in attitudes, triggered by the Houthi behavior during the past two years, the failure of the international community to push the Houthis to negotiations, and apprehensions of Iranian behavior in Yemen.

Key regional and international variables on which Saudi Arabia relies in launching the new offensive are as follows:

a) Changes in the US position

In early 2021, the Biden administration seemed determined to end the Yemen war, and exerted clear pressures on Saudi Arabia towards this end. US measures in this direction included suspension of arms deals and ceasing military and intelligence support to Saudi Arabia. The US administration also revoked the designation of Houthis as a terrorist organization without any recompense. Then the US appointed Timothy Lenderking as special envoy for Yemen. Lenderking, together with the UN envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, and his successor, Hans Grundberg, proposed initiatives to end the conflict, all of which were turned down by the Houthis.

The escalation of Houthi attacks inside the Saudi territory, coupled with changes in the US position in the first half of 2021, induced the Saudis to search for alternatives. They turned to Britain and Russia, and even to China and Turkey. Alternatives also included the Saudi efforts to purchase the Russian “Abakan” ballistic missile interception system.

^[7] The Saudi Air Defense Forces also secretly began developing an air defense program that included securing sensors, missiles, and control and command centers capable of dealing with any anticipated threats, such as the one that targeted the oil facilities in Ras Tanura.^[8]

Saudi Arabia also started building a ballistic missile plant with Chinese assistance.^[9] It seems that Saudi Arabia viewed the changing US position towards the Houthis and US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 as instances of careless abandonment of its allies. Indeed, the Houthis actually contributed to the shift in US position towards the war in Yemen.

The new transformation came after the meeting of US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Tim Lenderking with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on September 27, 2021. The Pentagon encouraged the CIA to share coordinates of strategic Houthi sites with Saudi Arabia. Due to this assistance, Saudi Arabia was able to target a number of ballistic missile and drone platforms at Al-Daylami Military Airbase near Sana'a Airport on November 29, 2021, and a large number of weaponry, drone, and ballistic missile depots in Sana'a, Thamar and Sa'ada, as well as targeting Houthi drone boats in Hodeidah governorate.^[10]

US Department of State officials mistakenly thought that revoking the Houthis as a terrorist organization would prompt the latter to work in good faith with the international community. Yet, contrary to these expectations, the Houthis only escalated their attacks on Marib governorate, hoping to control the city and the oil fields, as part of their quest to secure natural resources that would yield greater revenues to the group and contribute to their ability to continue fighting. The Houthis also stormed the US embassy in Sana'a, and kidnapped 36 local ex-employees who worked for the embassy. Although most of these were released later, at least six are still in Houthi custody. This move was viewed as a violation of US sovereignty, as outlined in the Vienna Convention, since the Houthi act was an intrusion on the territory of a foreign country.

This development led to the following:

- **Reevaluating the White House position:** By the end of last year, Washington was more willing to resume arms deals with Saudi Arabia, and approved a deal to sell air-to-air missiles to the Saudis. It was also reported that the Five Domains program, which comprised US Army veterans, and AITC trained members of the Saudi intelligence services, to classify and analyze intelligence data collected from various sources (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) for military purposes, under the supervision of the US security and defense agencies.^[11] The United States also reintroduced intelligence support that helped Saudi Arabia attack Houthi positions, including accurate coordinates to deter the Houthis off Marib.^[12] Moreover, it provided the Saudis with a bank of new targets, comprising Houthi arms depots and ballistic missile and drone platforms.
- **Changes in the US Congress:** Some senior Democrats changed their approach regarding their vision to end the war and demanded greater focus on the position and motives of the Houthis.^[13] Over the past years, those senators were among the most vocal advocates of ending the war. Both Chambers of the US Congress approved a \$650 million deal to sell missiles to Saudi Arabia.
- **Supporting the Yemeni government:** The United States has responded positively to the Yemeni government efforts to obtain the latest American secure military communications technologies. The Yemeni military attaché in Washington has hired the law firm, Tully Rinckey to facilitate a deal with Tecore Networks, a global company specializing in the telecoms industry. The Yemeni government is campaigning for funding from the US government to finance the deal.^[14]

It seems that Saudi Arabia is in agreement with the United States to prevent the Houthis from making any gains, and to push them back to their pre-August 2021 lines. This means the liberation of other districts such as Harib and Al-Abdiyyah, at a time when the Houthis had advanced in the Wadi district, the center of Marib governorate.

b) Changes in the position of the international community: It seems that the international community has become convinced that thwarting Houthi ambitions is the best strategy to coerce them to return to the negotiation table. The Houthis themselves are responsible for that consensus, as western and regional diplomats engaged in the Yemeni issue were frustrated with the Houthi behavior, especially with regard to the following:

- The Houthi rejection of the proposed peace initiatives^[15]
- The Houthi escalation in Marib despite international and humanitarian calls to end the war, as the continuation of fighting threatens two million IDPs in the city and surrounding areas. In addition, the Houthis control of Marib will only further complicate the war in Yemen.
- The Houthis refused to receive the new UN envoy, Hans Grundberg, who visited Aden, Taiz and Marib last December, but was denied a visit to the capital, Sana'a.
- This disappointment is compounded by the Houthi group disregard for the pressure exerted on it by Oman, where the Houthis run a political office. This development draws the attention of the various international actors to the fact that the Houthis could not be induced to return to negotiations except by curtailing their military ambitions.

Over the past years, the international community has relied on the influence of the Sultanate of Oman to push the Houthis to negotiations in good faith in the event that international pressure pushes Saudi Arabia and the internationally recognized government to a ceasefire and negotiations to recognize the Houthis. However, while all other parties welcomed the UN brokered initiative and other international initiatives, to the extent that they were adopted by Riyadh, the Houthis went on waging their internal wars.

This reflects frustration and disappointment with Houthi behavior. The Western diplomats' failure to understand the situation and the complications of the current Yemen war encouraged the Houthis to monopolize the pressure exerted by those diplomats on Riyadh and the Yemeni government, to boost their strength, continue the war and to evade direct and indirect pressures.

c) The UAE variable: By the end of 2019, the UAE announced withdrawal from the Yemen war. Yet, it retained a small contingent on the ground and claimed not to be involved in anti-Houthi operations. However, this claim was not true. On the contrary, the UAE supports multiple local militias, consisting of around 120,000 men under different designations, deployed in southern and western provinces. The Houthis claim that they have reached a rapprochement with the UAE according to which forces of the latter should be confined to the southern provinces of the country, while northern provinces should be kept away from any UAE interventions and forces.^[16] The Houthis and the Emiratis were brought closer together by their common fears of the Islah Party during the past years. Recently, the UAE began coordinating with Saudi Arabia, apparently at a US request, to coerce the Houthis to return to the negotiation table, after ‘Biden's diplomacy’ in Yemen seemed to worsen the situation. As the performance of the Saudi-led coalition dwindled, the Houthis felt emboldened, and began making gains in Marib and Shabwa, advancing towards the main oil and gas fields, as well as threatening to invade the southern part of the country again, which is a red line for the Emiratis, Saudis, and Americans alike.

The Emiratis believe that the Houthi presence in Shabwa violated that informal rapprochement, while Houthi propaganda assumes that their takeover of the three districts in Shabwa was tactic to encircle and ultimately seize Marib and overthrow the authority of the Islah Party!^[17]

The supposed UAE withdrawal from the war in Yemen was partially due to the damage of its reputation in international circles due to its involvement in the Yemen war. Some countries even went as far as taking procedures to ban the sale of arms to Abu Dhabi. As the American administration and the international community reverted to their former position towards the situation in Yemen, Abu Dhabi was emboldened to resurrect the momentum of its influence in Yemen. The UAE sway in Yemen did not cease at any rate, and it is currently utilized to strengthen the position of its local allies such as Tariq Saleh, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), and some of its Salafi satellites.

It is plausible that the UAE might monopolize the momentum of its renewed involvement to reach a rapprochement with the Islah Party to preclude recurrence of distortion of its reputation due to its hostile stance towards the Islah Party, which amounted to accusations of launching security campaigns to assassinate party leaders and members alike.

d- The Omani variable: Following his ascension to power in January 2020, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq Al Said initially seemed to follow the “pacifist” foreign policy of his predecessor Sultan Qaboos bin Said. However, there has been a shift in the Omani position under the leadership of the new sultan, in light of the following:

* Insecurity across Yemen and tensions with the UAE prompted Al Said to adopt a stronger stance. These security concerns coupled with skepticism about the political goals of the UAE have led Muscat to reconsider its policy towards its neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, a rare development in its own right.

* In 2021, Oman sent negotiators to Sana’a for the first time since 2015. These efforts were preceded by contacts between Al Said and the Houthi leader in an attempt to convince the latter to accept the international and Saudi initiatives in early 2021, but the efforts of the Omani leader failed!^[18]

* The Saudi Chief of General Staff, Fayyad bin Humaid Al-Ruwaili visited Oman in January 02-04, 2022 and held talks with senior Omani officials, including Deputy Prime Minister for Defense Affairs, Shihab bin Tariq Al Said and Chief of Staff of the Royal Armed Forces, Abdullah bin Khamis Al-Reesi.

The military visit came only a few days before declaring the new military operation. Contrary to usual practice, neither Oman nor any other country, nor the UNVIM team, expressed concern about the coalition’s escalation against the Houthis.

Old and new parties aligned against the Houthis

Taking advantage of these attitudinal shifts, Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government forces aligned themselves to launch an offensive against the Houthis, who had been exhausted in Marib battles. The new offensive was badly received in top Houthi circles and triggered disagreements within the group, in the midst of increasing suspicions of a conflict within the group between those who stress the need of maintaining contacts with Saudi Arabia, and those who believe that the Group's interests are exclusively tied to Iran.

This division is evidenced by internal differences. First, there are those who view the continuation of war as a catastrophe that weakens the group in the eyes of its supporters, due to the spiraling toll of casualties, and the risk of losing some of their earlier territorial gains in the event of counterattacks by government forces. On the other hand, advocates of the war believe that it is necessary to continue fighting since laying down their arms would mean risking their supporters' confidence in the decisions of the group's leadership. Moreover, there is the risk that Sana'a belt tribes might turn against the group if they sensed a Houthi weakness or decline of strength. It seems that the second pro-Iran party has the sway in Houthi decision-making circles.

These disputes coincide with the loosening grip of Iran, in addition to the confusion that affected the Houthis due to the death or killing of Hassan Eyrlo, who was appointed by Tehran as an ambassador to the Houthis in October 2020.

Eyrlo's presence in Sana'a since 2019 and after his appointment as Iran's ambassador to the Houthis contributed to boosting Iran's influence inside and outside the group, especially among politicians and tribal leaders, a development which angered some Houthi leaders and exacerbated the already existing differences within the group.

On the other hand, several Yemeni parties to the conflict are supported by the Saudis and Emiratis; namely,

1. Amaliqa (Giants) Brigades
2. The Yemeni Government Forces and Popular Resistance
3. The Happy Yemen Brigades.

1. The Giants Brigades

This is a large military force, trained and armed by the UAE and Saudi Arabia. It consists of 20,000-30,000 fighters distributed in 15 military brigades. Most of the needs of this force are supplied by Saudi Arabia, either directly or through the UAE. It is assumed that it is a faction of the Joint Forces led by Tariq Saleh, but that is only nominal. As for the force, it receives its instructions from the UAE, and currently from Saudi Arabia. Unconfirmed information maintains that this force is divided between the main supporters: Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The forces commanded by Abu Zara'a Al-Mahrami are closer to the UAE and are unwilling to fight the Houthis in the northern governorates, while the force under the command of the Salafi leader Hamdi Shukri is supported by Saudi Arabia, and was transferred from Shabwa to Marib.

The key features of this military force are:

- The Giants Brigades are deployed in the western coast region between Hodeidah and Taiz, and a unit of this force is transferred to Abyan governorate along the lines of contact between the internationally recognized government and the forces of the STC. Smaller units are also transferred to the southern governorates of Lahj and Al Dhali'. Those forces were transferred from the western coast to Shabwa governorate last November.

- Giants Brigades' fighters are recruited from several governorates. Most of them are Salafis from the southern governorates, especially Lahj. Some come from the governorates of Al-Dhali' and Aden. Four brigades, comprising up to seven thousand fighters, constitute the Tihama Resistance. Most of the members of this latter force belong to Hodeidah governorate (north).
- The Salafis constitute at least 10% of this military force. It is noteworthy that Salafis had been abused by the Houthis in the governorates of Sa'ada and Amran in 2014, and were expelled along with their families.

2. Yemeni Government Forces and Popular Resistance

These are the formal brigades of the Yemeni army, which is subject to the Ministry of Defense and the General Staff of the internationally recognized government, in addition to the Popular Resistance, which is composed of tribesmen from Marib and other Houthi-controlled northern governorates.

This force is poorly armed and has a constant shortage of ammunition. In addition, most soldiers go unpaid for periods of several months together. These brigades have proved resilient in thwarting Houthi attacks over the past two years.^[19]

3. The Happy Yemen Brigades

On January 14, 2022, the coalition spokesman, Turki Al-Maliki, announced that the Happy Yemen Brigades had joined the government forces in Marib battles. Never before has a force with the same name existed since the outbreak of the war. The brigades that are currently fighting the Houthis in Marib are:

- The four battalions, approximately 1,500 soldiers, which were previously deployed on the Saudi-Yemeni borders.
- The majority of soldiers of these battalions are Salafis.
- These battalions were transferred in December 2021 from the front lines in Saada governorate to southern Marib.

Impact of the military offensive during the first twenty days

Saudi Arabia benefited from the exhaustion of the Houthis in Marib governorate and other fronts during the past year. This prompted the coalition and the Yemeni government to action, triggering a Houthi reaction as a result. The domestic and external effects of this development can be summarized in the following.

I. Domestic Impact

Retaking Shabwa: During the first ten days, the Giants Brigades and the army announced recapturing the three districts (Usailan, Bayhan and Ain) in Shabwa governorate. However, part of Ain District, including its administrative center, is still held by the Houthis (as of 20/1/2022).^[20] It seems that the Giants Brigades were content with controlling the main road to Marib governorate, and viewed Ain as militarily unimportant at present.^[21]

The intervention of the UAE-backed Giants Brigades came after Abu Dhabi's request to remove the former governor of Shabwa, Mohammad Saleh bin Adyo, who is close to the Islah Party, and who publicly opposed UAE influence, and appoint Sheikh Awad Al-Wazir, who maintains good relations with the STC, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Commanders and military forces of the STC/UAE removed Ben Adyo under the new name of Shabwa Defense Forces, instead of the Shabwa Elite Forces, and returned to Ataq. In the meanwhile, these forces escalated their rhetoric against the Yemeni government and its armed forces, a move that can lead to an outbreak of clashes between the two parties.

Progress in Marib battles: The map of operations in Marib shows that government forces and the Happy Yemen Brigades are deployed in the southern zones of the Wadi District and surrounding areas, while the Giants Brigades are deployed in the western areas in Harib District. Both forces are separated by the Mala'a Mountain. Key developments in these battles since the first of January are as follows:

- The Houthis have lost parts of their territory in Harib district. The Giants Brigades besiege the district center from three main directions, while advancing towards Mala'a to join the government forces and the Happy Yemen Brigades.
- The government forces have greatly benefited from the momentum of the offensive to advance in southern Marib. They were able to end the Houthi threat to the Balaq mountain range, which extends over 20 kilometers and overlooks the city of Marib. Moreover, the government forces and the Happy Yemen Brigades made some progress in Al-Juba district.
- The Houthis have laid thousands of mines in areas they deemed vulnerable and hence would be lost to their opponents, thus impeding the progress of government forces and the Giants Brigades. The new military operation reveals that the Houthis possess sophisticated mines that killed some of the staff of the MASAM Program for demining.
- Abu Ali al-Hakim, director of the Houthi military intelligence, who leads the battle of Marib, failed to win the Marib tribes or persuade them to protect the Houthis and fight the government forces that were steadily advancing towards the Houthi-controlled areas. Al-Hakim met with tribal sheikhs of Ubaidah, al-Juba and Harib more than five times during the first half of January 2022.
- The Houthis failed to persuade the tribes in their dominions to mobilize more fighters. In at least one incident in Sana'a, the Houthis clashed with influential tribal personalities in Bani Al-Harith district, as those leaders refused to mobilize fighters.^[22] In the Anis and Al-Hada districts in Tamar governorate, which represent a repertoire of the group's fighters, the tribal sheikhs rejected Houthi requests to send fighters to Marib. "They told them that they were fighting a losing battle".^[23]

- The forces in Marib governorate will have a difficult time. There will be no rapid progress as in Shabwa governorate for reasons related to differences in terrain and the Houthis desperate attempt to score a victory in Marib. More importantly, a decisive victory in Marib requires Saudi Arabia and the UAE to supply the Yemeni military forces with all required weapons, at least with half of the capabilities of the forces that entered Shabwa.

3. Preparations for battles in Al-Bayda, Taiz and Hodeidah

The coalition and government forces are preparing to launch other offensives in these governorates.

- **Taiz:** It has been reported that huge preparations are underway for the redeployment of Tariq Saleh's forces to Taiz, which has been under Houthi siege since 2016. This would not be possible without coordination with the forces of the Taiz Axis. For this reason, commander of the Taiz Axis, Khaled Fadel, was invited by the coalition to Riyadh in mid-January^[24] for consultations on this strategic battle. There is a huge armament disparity between the Taiz Axis and the forces led by Tariq Saleh, as the UAE supplied the latter with sophisticated and modern weapons.

- **Hodeidah:** The coalition plans to push the Tihama Resistance Brigades towards Hodeidah city, even though these forces and the Giants Brigades have withdrawn from Hodeidah in November. Apparently, the goal of pushing the Tihama Resistance Brigades towards Hodeidah is to deter the Houthis from taking advantage of the involvement of the Giants Brigades in Marib, and Tariq Saleh's forces, in the case of their redeployment, in the battles in Taiz. In that case, the strategic districts of Khokha and Mocha will be vulnerable to Houthi threats.

- **Al-Bayda:** The coalition plans to push the government army forces into Al-Bayda governorate, by the end of January.^[25] The Houthis had announced their full control of Al-Bayda in September 2021.

II. Expanding the theater of operations to other parts of the region

II. Expanding the theater of operations to other parts of the region

In conjunction with the new military operation launched in early January, the Houthis launch counterattacks aimed at expanding the theater of operations to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The impact of this operation outside Yemeni borders has been clearly visible. The Houthis and their Iranian backers are trying to create a chaotic belt to disrupt security in the region and force the two countries to cease their support for the Yemeni government forces. Houthi attacks on targets inside Saudi territory have doubled in 2021. However, greater developments that bring about a new phase in the Yemen war are:

1. The Houthi piracy of the UAE-flagged vessel, *Rawabi*, and kidnapping its crew which consisted of 11 sailors of different nationalities, on January 02. This incident constituted a major threat to international navigation in the Red Sea. The Houthis justified their act by claiming that the vessel was loaded with weapons and military equipment, while the coalition reiterated that it was carrying a field hospital that had completed its mission in Socotra, and that it was dismantled and transferred to the port of Midi for humanitarian purposes.^[26] In fact, the videos published by the Houthis have a reverse effect, as the volume of displayed weapons is too small for a vessel on its way to a war zone. Moreover, the displayed vehicles and armored vehicles are too few for an effective military force. Rather, they indicate that the vehicles are essentially equipment used in logistical support for a field hospital. Apparently, however, the Houthi seizure of the vessel was a message to the UAE to desist from escalation in Shabwa and Marib.
2. On January 17, a series of drone and ballistic missile strikes claimed by the Houthis targeted fuel trucks at Musaffah Industrial Zone just outside Abu Dhabi, and a construction site at Abu Dhabi International Airport. The police said that three people (two Indians and one Pakistani) were killed and six others injured. The incident marked the first known deaths inside the United Arab Emirates in relation to the Yemen conflict and the first threat recognized by the UAE authorities. Abu Dhabi threatened an "appropriate retaliation".

The Houthis justified their attack as a response to the UAE re-involvement in the war in Yemen, and its recent moves in harmony with Saudi Arabia.

The attack on Abu Dhabi brings about a new phase in the war, a situation that raises multiple questions: How does this affect the UAE? What repercussions will the attack have on Abu Dhabi's policy towards Yemen? What are the implications of the attack for the UAE-Iranian and Saudi-Iranian consultations, as well as for the tensions in the Gulf waters? What are the US considerations and position towards the Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi?

a- Impact on the UAE

The Houthi attacks were anticipated by Abu Dhabi.^[27] However, the targets were big in size and sensitive for the Emiratis. Hence, they will negatively affect the UAE image as a “safe and stable” haven in a turbulent region. The incident may drag the UAE geographically and economically into the crisis belt that extends from Yemen to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. It also puts an end to the UAE propaganda that it had withdrawn from the war in Yemen.

b. Impact on the UAE policy towards Yemen

Although the attacks were anticipated, the appropriate response would be different. In the few days after the attack, the coalition launched a series of air strikes on Sana'a and Hodeidah, destroying strategic weapon depots and resulting in civilian casualties. The coalition also announced targeting Houthi military leaders. At the same time, several Houthi front lines were targeted for the first time since 2019.^[28]

The Houthis threatened to launch more counterattacks on targets inside the UAE if they continued to be attacked in Marib governorate, a move that might push the UAE to either of two scenarios at the level of military intervention. The first option is to re-abide by the previous rapprochements and avoid any confrontations with the Houthis, while maintaining influence in southern Yemen.

However, it is only a matter of time for the Houthis to proceed with their goal of controlling the southern governorates. Apparently, Duabi, the economic hub of the UAE, will exert pressure in the direction of this lenient option, since it will be severely affected if another attack is launched. Second, the UAE will support the full liberation of Marib governorate and the return to the pre-2018 military map in Yemen, forcing the Houthis to withdraw to the outskirts of Serwah district, besides retaking the strategic Al-Jawf Junction. However, adopting this option will mean rapprochement with the Islah Party and recognizing it as a field and political force that can be utilized to confuse the Houthis. Apparently, the second option is more viable as it fits in with other Saudi/UAE agreements such as that in relation to Shabwa, despite apprehensions of disagreements among their Yemeni allies.

At the same time, it means reversing the course of the new line of its foreign policy commenced in 2021, which focused on building good relations away from military interventions.

The UAE will work on three tracks internationally. The first is working towards a re-designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization. The United States is already considering this issue following a request submitted by Abu Dhabi. The second track has to do with escalation in the Security Council, where the UAE will exert efforts to target the Houthis with harsher sanctions. Yet, the legitimate government may be affected by some consequences of such sanctions. The third track is utilizing its relations with Europe, Russia and China to further condemn the Houthis and reduce international sympathy towards them.

c. Implications for regional security

The Houthi attacks on Abu Dhabi re-escalated tension in the region. It is difficult for the Houthis to launch such an attack without a green light, at least from Iran, which supplies them with weapons. While Abu Dhabi chose to blame the 2019 attacks in the Gulf waters on unidentified perpetrators, despite the clear indicators of Iranian involvement, this time it accused the Houthis of launching the attack.

Therefore, this attack mixes the cards in the region in two ways. First, it brings the UAE-Iranian rapprochement into a new light. The two countries have been conducting high-level negotiations over the past few months aimed at easing tensions in the region. Any Iranian attempt to deny involvement may be undermined by reports that the Houthi spokesman and the group's negotiating delegation were in Tehran meeting with President Ibrahim Raisi and the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, during the attacks on Abu Dhabi. Moreover, recent history also rebuts Iranian denial, as the attack on Saudi Arabia's Bqiq and Khurais oil facilities in 2019 was claimed by the Houthis, but it was later deemed to have probably come from Iran. Second, the same applies to the Saudi-Iranian consultations. The attack came at a time when Iran “re-sent three diplomats to Saudi Arabia; the diplomats arrived in Jeddah to assume their jobs at Iran’s permanent office to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, after a diplomatic estrangement that lasted for six years.”^[29] This will be viewed by Riyadh as an unfailing Iranian practice of sending threats, despite the kingdom's inclination to reduce tension.

It seems that Saudi Arabia and Iran benefit the most from the Houthi attack. For Riyadh, it brings Abu Dhabi back into the war, after the UAE’s withdrawal in 2019 constituted a severe blow to Saudi Arabia. To Tehran, the attack is a welcome message to the negotiators in Vienna that any new economic sanctions would destroy the economies in the region.

D- American considerations

Certainly, the US appears to be in a tight corner. The Biden administration one-year-long policy of making concessions to the Houthis and practicing pressure on its allies has backfired with the Houthis radically targeting the regional security. For the US, the attack is relevant in several ways:

- The attack was only a few kilometers away from Al-Dhafra Air Base, home to the US Central Military Base.

- The attack on Abu Dhabi International Airport is of concern to the US as American citizens travel through the airport. If another Houthi attack targeted Dubai and resulted in the death of foreigners, Abu Dhabi and Washington would be in a very critical situation.
- The attack confirms the failure of the diplomatic strategy announced by the Biden administration to end the war in Yemen, as the Houthis refused dialogue and persisted in their escalations inside Yemen and beyond. This state of affairs may cause Washington to lose its allies in the region and leave the door open to its opponents, Russia and China.
- If the United States increases its military activity in Yemen in support of its allies, it will provoke some criticism of the Biden administration. Re-designating the Houthis as a terrorist group, even though an available option, confirms the failure of Biden's strategy to end the war in Yemen and puts him in a very embarrassing position vis-à-vis the Republicans and American public opinion. If the Houthis continue to attack the UAE and vital facilities in Saudi Arabia, the administration will face questions of whether it is better to stand with its allies rather than make concessions to the Houthis and Iran, especially after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan last year.

Potential Scenarios

Saudi Arabia, the UAE and their regional and international allies are looking for new pressure mechanisms to bring the Houthis back to negotiations. However, all of their efforts were met with a military escalation by the Houthis, who prompted Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to launch a new military operation, the fragments of which reached the two Gulf capitals. This makes the available options narrower than ever before. Therefore, three scenarios are possible during the next stage.

Scenario 1: Continuing Military Pressure

Observers of the Houthi group behavior find that it resorts to dialogue and negotiations only when forced by great military pressure. This was evident in the eve of the Stockholm Agreement, which preserved the group's control over the port of Hodeidah after an imminent seizure of the port by the coalition-backed Joint Forces. This hypothesis may be the motive behind the coalition's announcement of a military operation and its intensive attacks on specific military targets. However, this scenario will not result in any progress unless the theater of operations is rearranged, the Yemeni army is supplied with quality weapons, and a large margin of freedom is left to the command of the legitimate government forces to mobilize energies for a battle that cannot afford to fail. Indeed, failure means Iranian control, through the Houthis, over the whole country. The success of this scenario requires strong American support for Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the reintroducing the defense and protection program in these two oil countries. The chances of coercing the Houthis to return to negotiations immediately due to military pressure are big, especially if Iran weighs the economic or military costs of its policy of manipulating the Yemen dossier.

This scenario is plausible if there is an American-Saudi consensus on the continuation and limits of military operations.

Scenario 2: Parallel economic sanctions to end the war

This scenario may be preceded by condemnation of the Houthi group and re-designating it as a terrorist group, as well as the deployment of international corps in the international trade routes in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to combat Houthi piracy. It also requires the initial step of adoption of UN resolutions that restrict the financial flows to the group and obstruct its utilization of national income resources such as oil, customs, communications and aviation, in addition to restricting Houthi interventions in relief work and benefiting from donor funds. This scenario requires putting powerful mechanisms to monitor the group's performance in place. Otherwise, the group's huge capacity to create alternatives will limit the success of such procedures. Moreover, Iran and its allies have extensive experience and great maneuvering capacity to evade sanctions in various ways.

The scenario of ending the war without taking parallel measures is no longer on the table since Saudi Arabia's withdrawal from the Yemen war is completely ruled out. However, in the case of Houthi intransigency, there are still doubts about the possibility of imposing an agreement that would deter a Houthi advance to southern provinces and border areas. The coalition shall take military measures to foil a possible Houthi expansion to eastern provinces and Bab Al-Mandeb, along with the internationalization of the status of the ports of Hodeidah and Saleef and restricting the Houthi group to the northern provinces under its control, which are characterized by dense population, difficult terrain and huge economic cost.

This scenario in effect postpones confrontations and prolongs the war, but it can serve as an emergency window for the coalition in case it failed to achieve a decisive military settlement, or to coerce the Houthis to peace talks.

Scenario 3: Houthi willingness to return to negotiations

The Houthis may be forced to return to negotiations by military pressure. Yet, this is futile - as demonstrated by previous agreements, particularly the Stockholm Agreement, unless the guarantees of implementing the articles of agreement are revised to ensure Houthi compliance.

This scenario seems plausible in light of the insistence of the international community to end the war in Yemen, and the Houthis' need to catch their breath after heavy military pressure.

Conclusion

It is clear that prolonging the conflict in the region plays into the hands of Iran. The continued escalation of the Houthis in Yemen confirms that the group has turned Yemen into a negotiating card within the Iranian nuclear program, hence rendering the national umbrella under which the various Yemeni parties to the conflict could negotiate as virtually non-existent. The group's escalation in international shipping routes and its UAV targeting of Abu Dhabi and Riyadh with missiles and drones have shown that it constitutes a real threat to regional and international security. This will mark the resignation of local actors, and practically render the fate of the Yemen conflict in the hands of regional and international actors.

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abaadstudies@gmail.com
info@abaadstudies.org

www.abaadstudies.org

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