

## A New Dimension of the Conflict in Yemen

by

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on

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For more than a week, the forces of the so-called Saudi-led Arab coalition have been assaulting Hodeida, a city with a population of well over 600,00 people located on the Red Sea coast of Yemen. Hodeida is also the location of a large port. So far, the Houthi insurgency, led by the Ansar Allah movement have been able to repel these attacks. The above mentioned port is a supply hub that plays an integral part in providing the entire northern part of the country with food, fuel, and medicines. Should this supply hub be destroyed, even the Yemeni capital - Sana'a may soon be starved into submission. The Saudi-led coalition made the decision to launch an attack on Hodeida, while still not having a direct response from Washington on the appeal to provide Riyadh and Abu Dhabi with military assistance in this operation. Although some sources still argue that the Pentagon chose to actually provide intelligence and logistical support to Saudi Arabia, with US warships patrolling just off the coast of Hodeida intensifying. Others say that American reconnaissance drones have been making sorties from bases in Yemen's Aden and Saudi Arabia's Najran to facilitate the targeting for the aircraft of the Arab coalition.

Apparently, the Houthis are fully aware of the fact that this time the Saudi-led assault can actually



reach the streets of Hodeida, transforming fighting into a bitter urban warfare. It is no coincidence that the head of the Ansar Allah movement, Abdel Malik El Husi has recently sent a message to the Secretary General of the Lebanese Shia military organization known as Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah demanding urgent assistance. Apparently, the Hezbollah has a number of experts pretty well versed in urban warfare, so the Houthis want them to train and support the detachments that are presently stationed in Hodeida. In addition, should the defense of the city actually fall, their experience will come in handy in the battle for Sana'a, which will inevitably become the next target of Saudi-led coalition forces. According to a number of sources in Beirut, this request has been received positively with Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps preparing to form the first group of "advisers" together with Hezbollah's experts. It's believed that a total of 80 experts have already arrived in Sana'a, ordering the construction of underground tunnels in both Sana'a and Hodeida, while training Houthi field commanders, who had previously received special training at Hezbollah bases in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

So far, members of the Saudi-led Arab coalition and the United States have no agreement regarding the political future of Yemen, since they have no idea what forces may be capable of leading the country should the Houthis choose to abandon Sana'a after a prolonged assault. The son of the now deceased ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh and former ambassador of Yemen to the UAE Ahmed Saleh plans to visit Riyadh for a meeting with Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, to take steps towards the facilitation of the departure of the so-called "lawful president" of the country, Mansour Hadi. His fate has already been decided, since no force believe he can play a part in the political life of Yemen in the future. For months he has been kept under house arrest in Riyadh and is no longer involved in any decision making. In addition, he has been removed from all negotiations over the country's post-war structure. Abu Dhabi's position on the future of Yemen is clearly beginning to prevail. Ahmed Saleh, and his cousin, the former commander of the Republican Guard, Tareq Saleh, who is leading the offensive of the Arab coalition forces against Hodeida, have enjoyed the support of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who seeks to see the son of the deceased ex-president become Yemen's next leader. Washington seems to also be content with this, since it has been working closely with Tareq Saleh while funding and training the Yemeni Republican Guards units.

Against this background, there's a visible intensification of diplomatic interactions in Yemeni-related circles carried out by one of the main regional allies of the UAE - Egypt. The director of the General Intelligence Service of Egypt, Abbas Kamel held a number of meetings in Cairo with representatives of various political forces of Yemen, including heads of a number powerful Yemeni tribes. Cairo is clearly preparing the grounds for a truce through a new round of talks between the Houthis and clan members who supported the former president, talks which may be prompted by the capture of Hodeida by the forces of the Saudi-led coalition.

The much discussed offensive against Hodeida is not going smooth, to say the least. The high command of the Emirates armed forces reported deaths of a number of UAE soldiers in Yemen. They were killed during an unsuccessful attempt to launch a naval landing operation, which was designed as a distraction for a large push aimed at the seizure of the airport, during which the Houthis destroyed a total of 11 armored vehicles. Immediately after the offensive began, the Houthis declared that they managed to sink a Saudi-led coalition ship. As of today the harbor and airport are still under the control of the Houthi government of Yemen.

In any case, the siege of Hodeida will be difficult for the Arab coalition. The determining factor in this struggle is time, which works in favor of the Houthis, if one has to take into account the ever growing international frustration over the unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Yemen. This will force the UAE and Saudi Arabia to stage a hasty offensive and in turn, lead to many mistakes. Moreover, for both countries, Yemen is just another front in a much larger regional struggle with Iran, on top of Syria (the main front of armed struggle against Tehran for Riyadh), and Iraq. And it is too expensive for Riyadh to carry on this fight on three fronts.

The war in Yemen has its own unique characteristics. If one is to ignore the propaganda, the Yemeni conflict, which triggered in 2011 by the so-called Arab Spring movement, was a demonstration of force against the dictatorship of the permanent president Ali Abdullah Saleh, but then quickly

evolved into a purely Yemeni conflict between South and North, aggravated by new factors like Iran, Al-Qaeda, along with evolving tribal interests. After all, Yemen is perhaps the only Arab country today, in which the factor of tribalism remains one of the leading aspects of internal political life. The now deceased ex-president managed to control this phenomenon with various degrees of success, but until this very day the Yemeni army detachments are nothing but highly-trained tribal militia groups carrying out the orders of tribal leaders that choose to obey or disobey the orders of commanders and the commander-in-chief of the national government. In this sense, it is very difficult to talk about the Yemeni army as a full-fledged and unified actor in this war as it follows the considerations of situational alliances of various tribes that have delegated their representatives to the armed forces.

Nevertheless, the basis of the conflict is the confrontation between the South and the North of the country. The forces that remain loyal to the exiled Mansur Hadi are weak, so they are forced to maneuver between the interests of various clans and groups of the South of Yemen and the interests of external sponsors, primarily the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Contrary to popular belief, Saudi Arabia is playing a rather limited part in this war, It mainly sends its aircraft to fly close air support for pro-Saudi forces and defending its southern territories from the Shia insurgence. At the same time, the Saudis are extremely jealous of the UAE, which bears the heavy load of the actual ground war. The Emirates are in dire need to establish control over some major port of Yemen to strengthen their positions on a very important oil supply route from the Persian Gulf through the Arabian and Red Seas to Europe. The Saudis managed to take Aden right from under the nose of the Emirates, and now the UAE is rushing for Hodeida. On one hand, the capture of Hodeida, the most important port of Yemen on the Red Sea, will put the Saudi-led coalition a step closer to the end of the war. Without supplies, the Ansar Allah movement will be forced to retreat to the northern mountainous areas, after which the question of its encirclement and complete destruction will become a matter of time, since the resources available for the Arab coalition and the Houthis are not comparable. The Ansar Allah situation is further aggravated by the fact that after the murder of Saleh, a significant part of its troops, which supported the former president, refused to carry on fighting for the Houthis.

On the other hand, Riyadh can under no circumstances allow Hodeida to fall in the hands of the UAE or its proxy forces of the Southern Resistance group, which, in essence, is one and the same. Accordingly, Saudi Arabia seeks to create significant problems. As a result, the war is extremely complicated, where the Houthis are not only benefiting from their valor and courage but also from the infighting between their opponents.

From a purely militarily standpoint, the operation against Hodeida aimed at capturing the port by advancing limited forces closer to the city, exposes their supply lines. This affords the Houthis a variety of targets and has seen their fighters wreaking havoc among enemy communication lines for days. This results in massive losses among Sudanese mercenaries, who participate in the offensive, however nobody seems to be concerned about such losses - they are, in a sense, an analog of the Iranian proxy forces in Syria. But, unlike Syria, Iran has little hopes in Yemen. The Houthis enjoy serious local support, but it remains extremely local: mainly in the area of residence of the Shia community in the north of the country. As for local forces elsewhere, they are forced to strike deals when necessary, which means that in case of a major defeat or a series of local defeats such allies will change their allegiance, and is a process that is gradually taking place already. As for the fall of Hodeida and Sana'a - it seems to be a matter of time. But we're not speaking weeks or months here, the most likely scenario is years of continuous warfare.