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How the Battle for Shabwa is Likely to Affect the Trajectory of War in Yemen

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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In the first half of January 2022, the Shabwa Governorate in southern Yemen, played host to military developments that led to the restoration of the last three districts by the internationally recognized government forces. These districts – Ain, Usaylan and Bayhan – had fallen under Houthi (Ansar Allah) control in September 2021. Subsequently, the battles spread to the strategically important Harib district, located in the nearby Marib Governorate, where government forces and their allies seek to regain large parts that they had lost in recent months. The Marib Governorate was the only complete northern governorate still in the hands of President Hadi’s government forces, and is the richest governorate in Yemen, enjoying oil wealth. Therefore, its restoration is considered a strong blow to the Houthis and any attempt to divide the country according to the pre-unification borders.

Context of the Battle for Shabwa

These transformations come in the wake of several developments on the Yemen war fronts towards the end of 2021, the most important of which was the progress made by the Houthis in the oil and gas-rich governorates of Marib and Shabwa, and the “redeployment” of the Arab coalition backed “joint forces,” which were stationed on the western coast (Tihamah) of the country. The redeployment operation in November 2021 sparked a lot of controversy, after the Houthis exploited it to control large areas south of Hodeidah.¹ As a result, six of the “Amaliqa Brigades”, “Giants Brigades”, which were stationed in Hodeidah, were transferred to Shabwa Governorate, at the end of December 2021, in an attempt to recover the districts of Baihan, Usaylan and Ain from the grip of the Houthis. Then more of these brigades and others called the “Shabwa Defense Force” were sent in. These are likely to be a new formation of the forces of the “Shabwa Elite” loyal to the UAE, which were defeated and dispersed during the rebellion of the Southern Transitional Council, also loyal to the UAE, against the internationally recognized government of president Hadi, in Aden and Shabwa, in 2019.²

Politically, the recent developments came after a series of disputes within the coalition supporting President Hadi’s government, as well as with its external allies, specifically the UAE. The Houthis took advantage of the tension between the leadership of the local authority and the Emirati forces stationed in the Balhaf marine facility for the export of gas, against the latter’s refusal to evacuate the facility, to seize the three districts in Shabwa. They have also benefited from the escalation of the popular movement against the government of President Hadi supported by the Southern Transitional Council in Hadramout Governorate.³ Some estimates indicate that the Emiratis allowed the Houthis to seize control the three districts of Shabwa as punishment for the governorate authority following disagreement. It was reported that units of the government allied forces stationed there withdrew as the Houthis advanced.

1 Coalition to Support Legitimacy: The redeployment of the coalition forces and the Yemeni government came within military plans to support the government,” *Kuwait News Agency* (KUNA), 15/11/2021, accessed on 14/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/31r1kFN>.

2 “Aden Conflict: Implications of the pro-Hadi Forces’ Defeat in the Capital,” Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 8/19/2019, accessed on 14/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3AcCxly>.

3 “Governor of Shabwa: The UAE Created Anti-State Militias in Yemen and Pays the Salaries of 90,000 Mercenaries per Month”, *Sputnik Arabic*, 14/13/2021, accessed on 14/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3digi2K>.

In this context, President Hadi's decided to dismiss the governor of Shabwa, Muhammad Saleh bin Uday, who opposes the UAE, on 25 December 2021, and assign the position to a leader in the General People's Congress, known for his close Emirati ties, Awad Muhammad al-Wazir. The dismissal of the anti-UAE governor came in the framework of multilateral understandings, which the Islah party did not lose sight of.⁴ These understandings were reached through a series of meetings, including President Hadi's meeting with the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohamed al-Jabir, on 5 December 2021 at his Riyadh residence, and then his meeting on 22 December with the Saudi Deputy Minister of Defense, Khalid bin Salman, in the presence of the Yemeni Vice President, Lieutenant-General Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar, and Yemeni Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, who visited Abu Dhabi on 31 December 2021; less than a week after the change in the leadership of the local authority in Shabwa in line with Emirati demands.⁵

The Repercussions of Battle for Shabwa on the Political Process

Recovering Shabwa contributed to raising the morale of the government forces, after suffering a series of defeats by the Houthis in late 2021, as well as pushing the Houthi threat out from the governorates of Shabwa and Marib. They have also helped to contain concerns about southern secession, as a result of the participation of The Giants Brigades, made up mostly from southern Salafis, who fought in the Harib and Al-Juba regions of Marib, contrary to the expectations of secession advocates, who called for them to stop at the pre-1990 borders, that is, at the Shabwa borders. These transformations indicate that the seven-year-old war has so far been governed by conflicting agendas between the different parties in the coalition supporting the government, both internal and external, and that resolving these contradictions is the main factor in resolving the war in favour of the government.

In addition, military transformations in Shabwa have facilitated fighting in the neighbouring Marib governorate to shift from a defensive to offensive position. Consequently, the government forces' operations east of the Al-Balaq mountain range, southwest of Marib city, expanded westward in the districts of Harib and Al-Juba. It is estimated that the government forces have the opportunity now to reach beyond the areas under their control in 2019, in the governorates of Al-Bayda, Al-Jawf, Sana'a and Saada.

Politically, so far, there has been no clear impact on the Houthi positions. It can thus be said that they have not backtracked on their stances towards proposals put forward for the peace process, in which the Saudi initiative stands out. The provisions of this initiative include compliance with the Gulf initiative and its implementation mechanism of 2011, the outcomes of the comprehensive national dialogue of 2014, and Security Council resolution 2216 of 2015. As the clear political impact of the field

⁴ Part of this can be understood, through the meeting that brought together the Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohamed al-Jabir, and leaders of the Islah party, in Riyadh, on 28 December 2021. See al-Jabir's tweet from the same day, accessed on 14/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3qwBBFU>.

⁵ These meetings coincided with the escalation of coalition air operations over Houthi areas of control, the faltering efforts of the Shabwa governorate leadership to restore the areas controlled by this group, and the continuous collapse of the value of the Yemeni Rial against foreign exchange.

military results is yet to crystallize, the Yemeni government, and the coalition behind it, can impose their political will. On the contrary, all indications point to the Houthis doubling down on their positions, and even showing a willingness to escalate, which is what they did when they declared responsibility for targeting sites on 17 January 2022 inside the UAE, which they blame for their expulsion from Shabwa through its support for the Giants Brigades. The targets that the Houthis claimed to have targeted in the UAE included Abu Dhabi airport and oil tanks in the Musaffah area, which they claim to have targeted with drones and ballistic missiles.⁶ Although it is difficult to ascertain Houthi claims about the size of the strike, this indicates their willingness to escalate, not to be flexible, after the losses they incurred in the recent battles, in addition to the fact that those who planned and executed the targeting of the Emirates will be expecting a response from the Arab Coalition.

Of course, it is not possible to ignore the link between the course of the war in Yemen and the ongoing negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program, and whether likely to result in the direction of an agreement or confrontation. It may be a coincidence that the Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, received a member of the Houthi political bureau, Mohamed Abdul Salam, in Tehran when Abu Dhabi was attacked by the Houthis, but it demonstrates the interconnected issues of the region.

Conversely, since then, signs of the impact of recent transformations have appeared in the form of pressures to implement some provisions of the Riyadh Agreement, of 2019. The Riyadh Agreement was reached on 5 November 2019, after violent battles broke out that summer between the forces of President Hadi's government, backed by Saudi Arabia, and the Southern Transitional Council, backed by the UAE, which led to the expulsion of the government from Aden and other southern governorates. The agreement at that time included the formation of a government equally balanced between the north and the south, and the return of Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalik to Aden in order for state institutions to resume work. The agreement also included three appendices containing political, economic, military and security clauses, but important parts of these appendices have not been implemented. The Southern Transitional Council is trying to evade its implementation, especially in Hadramout and Mahra. Therefore, it is not possible to read the escalation of the Southern Transitional Council in these two governorates in isolation from the results of the transformations taking place in Shabwa.

Operation “Yemen Freedom”

In conjunction with the field progress in Shabwa governorate, on 12 January 2022 the spokesman of the Arab Coalition, Brigadier Turki Al-Maliki, announced during a press conference held in Ataq, the center of Shabwa governorate, the launch of an operation he called “Operation Yemen Freedom.” He indicated that it is not a purely military operation, but also has developmental and

⁶ “War in Yemen: Houthis threaten more attacks on vital targets in the UAE”, *BBC Arabic*, 1/17/2022, accessed on 18/1/2022, at: <https://bbc.in/3KoTJtk>.

economic dimensions.⁷ The absence of any details about how this economic and development process will be executed prompted skeptics to dismiss it as some sort of propaganda, and that the new operation will likely resemble “Operation Restoring Hope” launched by the Arab coalition in April 2015, after the conclusion of “Operation Decisive Storm.” The war shows no prospect of a solution, amid the escalation of fighting and the continued deterioration of economic and living conditions in the country. There is no evidence for this from the statements of the new governor of Shabwa, Awad Al-Wazir, who ruled out any possibility of reopening the Balhaf gas facility anytime soon, indicating that it is too early to talk about this due to various obstacles.⁸ In addition, Saudi Arabia failed to transfer the financial deposit that it promised to the Central Bank of Yemen to mitigate the deterioration of the value of the Yemeni Rial against foreign currencies.

Conclusion

The recent political and military developments, which resulted in the Yemeni government forces regaining full control of Shabwa governorate, and their progress towards lost territory in Marib, marked an end to the recent series of Houthi military victories aimed at completely expelling the government forces from the northern regions and incursion to the south. These developments may convince the Houthis of the absurdity of counting on a military solution to the conflict in their favour, at least in the north, after their attempts to exploit the contradictions and different agendas within the ranks of their opponents’ coalition. But so far, there are no indications in this direction, especially in light of the results of the Saudi-Iranian dialogue and the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program, which means a political solution to the war remains out of reach.

⁷ “The Arab Coalition Launches Operation ‘Yemen Freedom’ after Declaring Full Control of Shabwa Governorate,” *RT Arabia*, 11/1/2022, accessed on 18/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3KhX7WH>

⁸ “Interview with the Governor of Shabwa,” Al-Hadath Channel, 16/1/2022, accessed on 16/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/34Ollmj>.