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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Operation Golden Arrow: the Prospects for a Resolution to the Yemeni Conflict in 2017

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Mar 2017

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Introduction

Forces loyal to the elected Yemeni government have been able to make rapid and significant headway on three separate yet simultaneous fronts in recent weeks. This has worked to recapture government momentum following a period of more than two years when the Houthi rebels, allied to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, had seized the upper hand. At the start of their rise, the Houthis captured the nation's capital Sanaa, and sought to take the south of Yemen at the beginning of the following year. By 2015, however, forces loyal to the president of elected government Abd Rabo Mansur Hadi, rallied to route a total takeover. As part of this new offensive, Yemeni government forces have advanced on three fronts simultaneously, pushing the Houthi-Saleh alliance back into the Governorate of Saada; driving closer to Houthi positions in the administrative district of Nahm, some 70 km to the northeast of the capital, Sanaa; and, most importantly, government forces have liberated the historic port of Mocha, previously identified by the government side as one of the most strategically vital to "Operation Arrow", which aims to restore the Red Sea coast.



Figure 1 Yemen's ports along the Red Sea.

Operation Golden Arrow

Launched in January 2017, Operation Golden Arrow is an effort by Yemeni government forces working with a Saudi Arabian-led coalition that targets Houthi-Saleh forces along the Red Sea coastline. It is as thus far focused efforts on areas surrounding Bab Al Mandeb. Pro-government forces have already captured 75 kilometers of coastline, including the two Red Sea ports of Mocha and Dhubab, in addition to the Al Omar military base.

The operation includes five Yemeni army brigades, which were trained and equipped in Aden following the thwarting of a Houthi attack on its southern ports in mid-2015.¹ Of the five brigades, the third unit, formerly lead by General Omar Said al-Subaihi, has been the most distinguished. In the battle to re-take the port, Subaihi was joined by the Deputy Chief of the General Staff in Yemen Brigadier General Ahmed Seif Al Yafai. Both men were killed in battle, the latter by a heat-seeking missile on February 22.

The gains secured through Operation Golden Arrow have had a positive impact not only on the government's military position, but should also bolster its negotiations abilities should the Yemeni peace process ever be re-started. This is in part because the aims of the operation are quite vast, as Yemeni Armed Forces spokesman Abdo Majali has stated, Golden Arrow aims to secure the 442 km Red Sea coastline, which would cut off a key Houthi-Saleh alliance supply line. This would, it is hoped, force the Houthi-Saleh alliance to either agree to a political settlement based on the 2011 GCC Initiative, the Outcomes of the National Dialogue (2014) and UNSC Resolution 2216 (2015), or face a battle for Sanaa.

In the shorter term, Operation Golden Arrow continues, and will next seek to capture the port of Midi, located near the Saudi border. A presumed success will be followed by what is expected to be a more significant battle, to recapture the ports of Al-Salif and Hodeida, the latter of which is the most vital maritime port controlled by the Houthi-Saleh alliance along the Red Sea. Given the strategic value of the ports, it is no surprise that the rebels in the Houthi-Saleh alliance have put up fierce resistance. They, very

¹ "Operation Golden Arrow Begins," *Stratfor*, January 9, 2017, accessed on February 10, 2017, at: <http://bit.ly/2lv9hPj>

adroitly, see that maintaining a maritime outlet to the Horn of Africa and its smuggling routes as the key to both political and military survival.

Factors in Favor of the Government

These latest military developments have come at a time of regional upheaval, bringing about mixed results for the combatants in the Yemeni conflict. Government forces were buoyed by the return of President Hadi to Aden, his declared "Temporary Capital" and the makeshift seat of the Central Bank. In addition, the Hadi government has been strengthened by Brigadier General and Vice-President Mohsen Al-Ahmar's shift into full military action, in addition to securing the payment of civil servants' salaries, which the Houthi-Saleh alliance had failed to deliver on for three years.

Also impacting the conflict in Yemen were changes in the international environment. This was most clearly visible in the new White House administration, which appears to be less tolerant of Iranian intervention in the Middle East, including in Yemen. This will likely influence future dealings with the Houthi-Saleh alliance. Indeed, the first signs of such a change were at the four-party Yemen follow-up group meeting. Formed in May 2016 by the foreign ministers of the United States, United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (replacing the earlier, and much larger, 18-member alliance that included Qatar and Turkey), at the first meeting of the group post-US elections, the new representative made it clear that support was for President Abd Rabo Mansur Hadi.

This is a significant shift from the former US Secretary of State John Kerry, who proposed a purely ceremonial role for Hadi, and suggested that Vice-President Brig. Gen. Al-Ahmar should step down. The plan, proposed in the final days of the Obama Administration, would have seen the appointment of a new Vice President with expanded powers, but only after the withdrawal of the Houthi-Saleh alliance from Sanaa and the handing over of their heavy and medium-range weapons to the government. At the time, the Hadi government had refused to endorse the proposal, believing it gave undue legitimacy to the Houthi-Saleh alliance, which it regarded as usurpers, without offering any serious guarantees for their conduct, while simultaneously undermining the authority of the elected Hadi government.²

² "Hadi rejects UN peace proposal for Yemen," *The National* (Abu Dhabi), October 30, 2016, available online: <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/hadi-rejects-un-peace-proposal-for-yemen>

The first meeting of the Yemen Quartet to be held under President Trump took place on February 17 in the German city of Bonn. The new American member of the Quartet, Rex Tillerson, brought first-hand experience of Yemen with him, having been the country manager of oil giant Exxon in that country from 1995 to 1998. Tillerson had also made clear during his confirmation hearings in front of the US Senate that he believed that his country should play a larger role supporting President Hadi.³

The Hadi government has already started working to reap any possible rewards of the shift in sentiment in Washington. The first move is to have the Houthi militia classified as a terrorist organization by the United Nations.⁴ This will serve as a sort of test case for the new administration, since a similar move was shot down by the Obama Administration, which regarded the armed group as a legitimate party to an ongoing political conflict in Yemen, and even a potential ally in the war against al-Qaeda and ISIL in Yemen.⁵ If the Trump administration adopts the position of its short-lived National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, who believed the Houthis were a terrorist force answerable to Iran, then this will heavily influence on the trajectory of the conflict in Yemen.

Developments Detrimental to the Government

While some of these developments will support the negotiating position of the Hadi government, more immediate concerns are the inability of loyalist forces to actually govern areas which they have regained. The current shifts may mean changes down the line, but for now the Yemeni government is unable to provide basic life necessities for the civilians in liberated areas; in short, Hadi's side is incapable of effective governance. This situation is made more complicated by the conflicting interests of groups that support the government. A lack of resources and support means that the

³ "Saudis voice optimism about relations with US under Trump," *Associated Press*, February 16, 2016, available online: <http://www.bigstory.ap.org/article/76e428dbc08747b49995d85e77a3a2e2/trumps-secretary-state-faces-questions-first-trip>

⁴ "Yemen requests UN to designate Houthis as 'terrorists,'" *Al Arabiya English*, February 19, 2017, available online: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2017/02/19/Yemen-requests-UN-to-designate-Houthis-as-terrorists-.html>

⁵ See Doyle McManus: "Why the U.S. is courting the Houthis taking control in Yemen," *The Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2015, available online: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-mcmanus-yemen-houthis-20150208-column.html>

policy on the ground is determined by localized groups, rather than a coherent government position. This was brought into sharp relief during the armed mutiny at Aden Airport on February 11 and 12. President Hadi was unable to hand control of the airport over to his Presidential Guard, and instead the airport remains in the control of a UAE-backed rebel group from the south. So while the airport is not controlled by the Houthi-Saleh alliance, it is not truly under the control of the government. Having to deal with the local interests of pro-government groups may in fact prolong the conflict. It will certainly make taking control of the Red Sea cost a longer and more laborious process.

Other complicating factors include American policy directives, which remain vague and rhetorical. Similarly, any strategy guiding Saudi pledges to spend \$8 billion on reconstruction in Yemen also remains vague. With no action yet taken, Hadi supporters must ask whether the pledges were made merely to divert international criticism resulting from the massive human suffering caused by nearly two years of aerial bombardment coordinated by Riyadh. Other options could be that the Saudis aim to use the funds to incentivize life in government-controlled areas, in turn driving frustration in Houthi-controlled districts. The pledge could also be an indication that an end to the conflict is almost in sight.

Conclusion

While the achievements of Operation Golden Arrow cannot be underestimated, they raise further questions about the possibilities for the future of Yemen. Most pressing, is whether the operation, alongside as well as separate military advances in the Baqim District of the Saada Governorate are part of a wider strategy to defeat the Houthi-Saleh alliance, or are they merely tactical retaliations to previous attacks by the rebels, including the attack on the USS Mason and the destruction of the Emirati HSV Swift? It remains unclear whether Operation Golden Arrow will usher in a resolution to the Yemeni crisis, either on the battlefield or at the negotiating table.