The war over the Bab al Mandab straits and the Red Sea coastline

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The strait of Bab al-Mandab is a strategic waterway located between Yemen, Djibouti, and Eritrea, where the Red Sea joins the Indian Ocean. At its narrowest point, the strait is only 29 km wide between Yemen on one side and Djibouti and Eritrea on the other.

- The Bab al-Mandab Strait is a critical junction for world trade: Almost all of the trade between the European Union and China, Japan, India and the rest of Asia passes through the Bab al-Mandab strait.
- Up to 30% of the world's oil, including all of the oil and natural gas from the Persian Gulf heading west passes through the Bab al-Mandab strait.
- The only alternative route, around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, is thousands of miles longer and much more expensive. [1]

The strait had been in the hands of the Iranian backed Houthis and their allies, units loyal to ousted former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, since March 2015.

In October 2015, Yemeni troops loyal to president Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Saudi coalition forces seized the island Perim and gained control of the Yemeni side of the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait.

Yemen's army, backed by the Saudi-led coalition, launched in January 2017, a major military offensive, **operation 'Golden Spear'**, aimed at ousting the Houthis from the country's long western coast and securing the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait against Houthi missile attacks. The final destination of the offensive is the city of Hodeida, the last major coastal city under their control.

Yemeni forces backed by the Saudi-led Arab Coalition liberated the strategic Red Sea port city of Mokha in Yemen's Taiz Governorate, from Iran-aligned Houthis on January 26, 2017. The liberation of Mokha has facilitated moving to the operation's next target, Hodeidah, the largest port in the area controlled by Iran-backed militants.

Yemeni Joint Forces backed by the Arab Coalition launched on May 11, 2018, a battle to liberate Hodeida and regain control of its strategic port from the Houthis. The Houthis seized control of Hodeidah in October 2014, a month after seizing the capital Sanaa.

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The liberation of the Bab al Mandab straits

In early October 2015, the Saudi led coalition launched an offensive to capture the area from Aden toward the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The coalition forces included a UAE battery of self-propelled howitzers, a battalion of mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs), and a mixed task force of company-sized units, including a UAE Leclerc tank company and Saudi and Bahraini mechanized units.[2]

The coalition forces met with little resistance during its 160-kilometer advance from Aden to the Bab al-Mandab. By the second week of October 2015, Houthi forces holding the strait had pulled out. Mop-up operations continued with Saudi and Egyptian airstrikes and naval gunfire supporting naval and helicopter landings to clear the Red Sea islands.[3]

Operation "Golden Spear"

Operation "Golden Spear" aimed at liberating the Bab al-Mandab strait, all the west coast of Yemen, including the ports and entire Taiz province.

Operation" 'Golden Spear" along the western coast kicked off on January 6, 2017, when hundreds of army troops and allied resistance fighters marched towards strategic coastal regions on the Red Sea.

On January 7, 2017, government forces continued advances restoring control over key positions, including a mountain Owaid and in Aelaidlh South Aloakhlud area. After taking the small village of Dhubab, the coalition forces moved towards Mokha.

General Omar Said Subaihi, commander of the southern resistance forces — one of three main factions that make up Yemen's forces — was killed by rebel snipers at the beginning of the offensive in Dhubab. His death has been used as a rallying call for other southern militias from the Subaihi and Qasimi tribes to join the fight against the rebels in Taiz.

Army troops managed abort militia infiltration attempts that were accompanied with violent bombardment across eastern, southern and western fronts, as well as increased fighting in Jabal Habashi, west of Taiz.

Houthi media claimed that the leader of the militia's political council, Saleh Al Samad, had met with tribal leaders in Mokha securing a pledge from them to help them fight against government forces.

The liberation of Mokha

Mokha has long been famous for its seaport where the country's internationally-renowned coffee is shipped from. The Yemen government and the Saudi-led coalition have accused the rebel forces of using the town's ancient seaport to smuggle in arms from Iran and other suppliers.

UAE forces were involved with planning the operation and provided intelligence to the Yemeni ground troops, which were being advised and assisted by Emirati Special Forces. For more than two weeks, government forces have battled Houthis and renegade army units loyal to ousted president Ali Abdullah Saleh.

To slow the government forces' advances, retreating Houthi militants have left behind thousands of landmines.

After heavy clashes with Houthi rebels, Yemen government forces backed by coalition jets, attack helicopters and warships stormed the town of Mokha and its seaport from different directions and on January 23, 2017, took control of the strategic port town of Mokha.

The liberation of Mokha has facilitated moving to the operation's next target, Hodeidah, the largest port in the area controlled by Iran-backed militants.

Arab Coalition Forces, have destroyed on January 28, 2017, an Iranian military drone near Mokha. The drone was at a mobile launching platform, intended to target Yemeni forces participating in the liberation of Mokha city.

The liberation of Midi

The battle for Midi has been one of the longest-lasting continuous campaigns in the war (3 years). On April 11, 2018, forces loyal to the internationally-recognized president of Yemen, backed by the Saudi-led coalition troops and fighter jets, seized control of the port city of Midi in the northern province of Hajja after fierce clashes with the Houthis. Many Houthi combatants had surrendered to army units, while others fled the site.[4]

The commander of the 5th Military Region and the governor of Hajjah raised the flag, accompanied by officials from the Sudanese and Saudi militaries.

Yemen's minister of information and military commanders said that government forces wrested complete control of the Red Sea city and explosives experts were defusing thousands of landmines planted by the defeated militants.[5]

Midi like other ports along the Red Sea, was used by Houthi rebels as an entry point for sneaking arms into the country.

Yemen's port city - Hodeidah

Hodeidah with a population of 600,000 people is the third most populated city in Yemen. Hodeidah is considered a hub for business and industrial activities and its port is considered the second biggest in the country after Aden port. The control over Hodeidah port also means the control over economic incomes from customs and tariffs on exported and imported goods.[6]

Yemen's port city of Hodeidah has a strategic importance:[7]

- The port city is the command headquarters of the Houthis on the western coast and the main gateway where Houthis smuggle in weapons. By losing the strategic port, the supply of weapons and ammunition will become very difficult and the Houthis will be confined to closed, landlocked areas.
- Hodeidah contains many important military and security installations and important ammunitions depots for the Houthis, especially naval mines.[8]
- Hodeidah is a source of threat for maritime routes in the Red Sea and the Houthis have attacked Saudi Arabian and Emirati ships.
- Hodeidah is the country's main gateway for humanitarian aid. The port city is used by humanitarian and aid agencies to get in aid to areas under the Houthi control.
- Hodeidah is a major passage to the capital of Sanaa.
- The port of the city is also considered the major gateway to the Yemeni strategic islands on the red sea like the Hanish Islands.

Iran has provided the Houthi militias with weapons through the port of Hodeidah, through a line extending from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas through Somali ports and small islands, used to stop and transfer arms by small boats to the coasts of Hodeidah.[9]

The operation to liberate Hodeidah - Operation 'Golden Victory'

The operation launched on May 11, 2018, was aimed at seizing control of two districts in Hodeida and setting the stage for another larger offensive on the city of Hodeida, the last major coastal area under Houthi control.

The operation coincided with a visit of Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi and his deputy Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar to the headquarters of the joint command of the Arab Coalition in Riyadh to receive a briefing on battlefield developments. The Yemeni president met with Lt. Gen. Fahd bin Turki bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, the commander of the Joint Forces. Later, the Saudi commander of the joint forces of the Arab coalition, visited advanced military units on the field in Yemen.[10]

Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi arrived on June 14, 2018, to Aden, to oversee the military operation to liberate Hodeidah. Upon his arrival at the Aden International airport, Hadi said: "The hour of victory is close and the return of justice is nearing that will lead to the triumph of the will of the Yemeni people." The Yemeni president praised the brotherly stances expressed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the battlefields of honor and heroism, in order to put an end to the Iranian project in Yemen and its expansionist ambitions in the region.[11]

The operation plan - Yemeni army has devised a plan that consists of three axes to liberate Hodeidah:

- The plan stipulates entering from the city's southern side while closing off the southeastern part of the road that leads to the Bajil district to prevent the Houthi militias from receiving any reinforcements.
- An exit from the northern side will be opened to give Houthi militants a way to escape while a new front towards the international airport will be opened as well.[12]

The operation was launched after Yemeni forces secured areas in the west and southwest of Taiz and cut supply lines to Houthis and coalition fighter jets carried out dozens of air sorties in Hodeida province, hitting Houthi gatherings and equipment and killing dozens of rebels, including field commanders. [13]

The Yemeni Joint Forces launched a wide operation from two axes towards Hodeida in the north and towards Al-Jarrahi and Al- Tuhayta.

Government forces seized control of the Al Hayma seaport which has long been used by the Houthis for smuggling in arms and drugs. Government forces also stormed Kahboub Mountains west of Taiz city after cutting off roads to pockets of Houthi militants and marched towards Al Ameri and Al Wazyia regions.

The offensive on Hodeidah is being carried out by a coalition of forces including the National Resistance, a group of fighters loyal to Yemen's ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Tihama Resistance, a group of fighters loyal to Yemen's exiled President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the Southern Movement's "Security Belt" forces and the Giant Brigades("Amaliqa Brigades"), an elite unit backed by the UAE.[14]

Thousands of elite Republican Guards and Special Forces that defected from Houthi ranks after the killing of Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's ousted president, in December 2017, are now fighting for government forces.

After liberating the district of al-Durayhimi, Yemeni armed forces from found anti-ship missiles similar to the ones used in the past by the Houthis to target civilian and military ships off Hodeidah. The Houthis have been using the district of al-Durayhimi as a starting point for launching missile attacks against international ships in the Red Sea and also to target civilians in al-Mokha and al-Khokha.[15]

They also found two ballistic missiles left behind by Houthi militias before they fled from their positions at the coastal al-Durayhimi district.[16]

The Houtis and the battle of Hodeidah

A number of Houthi commanders and hundreds of combatants have been killed in the battles. Local media reported a major retreat by the rebels on May 28, 2018, with the Houthi-appointed governor of the city purported to have fled after coalition forces seized several areas along the Red Sea coast.[17]

Houthi militias have booby-trapped the port of Hodeidah. They also pushed hundreds among their ranks of militia fighters in Sanaa, Imran and other areas to commit suicidal attacks to protect Hodeidah.[18]

Houthi militias in Hodeidah have removed tens of Iranian military experts to other places for their safety, after the Yemeni armed forces backed by the Arab coalition advanced to the city.[19] Walid al-Qadimi, deputy governor of Hodeidah, said that 50 Iranian experts have been transferred to the capital Sanaa and Hajjah

governorate which is a stronghold of the Houthis, while a number of them still remained in the mountainous hills in Hodeidah.[20]

Houthi militias looted institutions in Hodeidah, such as the branch of the Central Bank there, in what appears to be a move ahead of their withdrawal from the city.[21]

Coalition air forces successfully intercepted six ballistic missiles launched on May 29, 2018, by Houthi militias targeting camps for government forces in al-Khokha coastal town of Hodeidah.[22]

Local Yemeni sources said that the Houthi militias have been preventing civilians wishing to leave Hodeidah from leaving, raising concerns about their use as human shields after deploying heavy weapons north of the city.[23]

Houthi leader Abdel-Malek al-Houthi called on his followers on June 14, 2018, to head to the frontlines to halt the advance of Joint Forces. [24]

On June 16, 2018, Houthi rebels have instructed civilians to move away from the outskirts of the city and towards the city center.[25]

Houthi militias erected checkpoints at the eastern and northern entrances of the city to kill escaping rebels and obstruct the displacement of civilians.[26]

The failure of negotiation and the attack on Hodeidah

The "Battle for Hodeidah" comes after several calls - put forward by the Yemeni government and the Saudi led coalition- to the United Nations in order to take over Hodeidah port and supervise its operations and force out the Houthi militias.[27]

Martin Griffiths, the United Nations special envoy to Yemen, arrived to Houthi-held Sanaa on June 2, 2018, to push for resumption of peace talks. [28] The UN's envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffith, advised the Houthi militias to withdraw from Hodeidah so it can be placed under the UN's supervision. Griffith told Houthi leaders that the first step towards reaching a political solution is for them to withdraw from Hodeidah and its strategic ports.[29]

Yemen's government declared on June 12, 2018, night that negotiations had failed to force the rebels from Hodeida, and that a grace period for UN-led peace efforts was over.

The government reiterated that it will carry out its national duty towards the people of Hodeidah, with the coalition's support, after the port is completely liberated and will work to mitigate their suffering and restore life to normal in all districts in the governorate after it's purged from the Houthis. It also promised the Yemeni people that it will carry the good news "of liberating Hodeidah soon."

The government said in a statement carried by Yemen's state news agency Saba:

"All peaceful and political means of removing the Houthi militia from Hodeida port have been exhausted. Liberating the port represents the beginning of the Houthis' collapse. It will secure navigation in Bab-Al-Mandab Strait and it will cut off Iran's hands that have drowned Yemen with weapons that are used to shed the Yemenis' blood".

The Saudi coalition began its assault on June 12, 2018, on Hodeidah. Emirati forces are leading ground forces mixed with their own troops, irregular militiamen and soldiers backing Yemen's government. Saudi Arabia has provided air support, with targeting guidance and refueling coming from the US.[30]

On June 13, 2018 the Yemeni army forces have seized control over al-Nakhila suburb south of Hodeidah, shortly after the battle began. Yemeni army had pushed its military reinforcements to Hodeidah's outskirts and deployed on the confrontation fronts to launch its decisive battle to liberate the city.

On June 16, 2018, forces from the Arab Coalition entered the airport of Hodeidah. The airport is located to the south of the city-center with heavy fighting still ongoing on Hodeida's southern edges. Victory for the coalition in their first attempt to capture a strategic part of a well-defended city could put the Houthis in their weakest position since the conflict erupted three years ago.[31]

Meanwhile, forces from the UAE-backed Amaleqa brigades, backed by air cover from the coalition forces, were heading to eastern Hodeidah province to attempt to cut off the main road that links it with the capital, Sanaa. If government forces capture the Kilo 16 Road they would trap the Houthi militias in Hodeidah and the western coast and prevent them from receiving supplies from the capital. The Houthis are then expected to have no choice but to head to the northern province of Hajjah.[32]

The Yemeni Ministry of Defense has announced the death of more than 500 members of the militia in six days of fighting in Hodeidah.

The Humanitarian crisis

The Hodeida port is crucial for the flow of food supplies into a country that is on the brink of famine. Jolien Veldwijk, acting director for Care International in Yemen, said that the port of Hodeida is crucial for aid agencies to be able to do their work. "More than two-thirds of the people of Yemen count on the food that is imported through the port of Hodeida," Veldwijk said. [33]

Veldwijk added that: "Even before the offensive on Hodeida started, already 8 million Yemenis were at risk of famine and we really expect this number to increase rapidly, even if the port is closed for one day." [34]

Lise Grande, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, said that humanitarian agencies "fear, in a prolonged worst case, that as many as 250,000 people may lose everything - even their lives in Hodeida".[35]

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed concern at the situation in Hodeida and called on all parties to "honor their commitments to working with the UN…… I have spoken with Emirati leaders and made clear our desire to address their security concerns while preserving the free flow of humanitarian aid and life-saving commercial imports," Pompeo said.[36]

Apart from the battle to recapture Hodeidah from Houthi militias, the Arab coalition said they have also launched a large-scale, comprehensive plan for the rapid delivery of humanitarian aid through the port of Hodeidah to the governorate and areas liberated from Iran-backed Houthi militias.

A statement from the coalition said the humanitarian focus of the ongoing operation to liberate the city is being done in order to secure the arrival of humanitarian aid without any obstacles to the ports to reach the Yemeni civilians.[37]

The UN envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, returned to the Houthi rebel-held capital Sanaa on June 16, 2018, for talks on Hodeidah. Griffiths is expected to propose to Houthis that they cede control of the Red Sea port to an UN-supervised committee to avoid further fighting with advancing government troops which are backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.[38]

The Arab Coalition said that work is continuing with the United Nations Verification and Inspection Commission (UNOV) on the flow of imports and fuel coming into Yemen's main port of Hodeidah. The coalition confirmed that permits were still being granted to vessels heading to Hodeidah Port, adding that two commercial ships were authorized to enter the port since the battle to liberate the city from Houthi militias began.[39]

The Yemeni army said on June 17, 2018, it was ready to open safe corridors for civilians who want to leave Hodeidah. Houthi militants willing to put down their weapons would also be given safe passage, the army said.[40]

Summary

The May 2018 offensive is aimed at liberating the city of Hodeida, the last major coastal area under control of the Houthi militias. Liberating Hodeidah would give the Arab coalition the upper hand in the war, which it has fought since 2015 to restore the internationally recognized government led by President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

If the Yemeni armed forces backed by the Arab coalition regain control over the city, then all coastal fronts vital for Houthis armed and logistic supplies will consequently fall, especially given that the Yemeni legitimate government has control over the strategic ports of the coastal city of Midi and al-Mokha.

The "Battle of Hodeidah" is the key to further military inroads against the Iranian backed Houthi rebels whose resources and morale are declining in tandem with the shrinkage of the areas under their control and the increasing difficulties they are having with recruiting.[41]

Cooperation between Yemeni factions and the death of senior Houthi commanders contribute to the government forces success. Houthis' major battlefield setbacks are linked to the death of several military and political leaders in Saudi-led air strikes. The death of Saleh Al Sammad, the president of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, who was killed in an airstrike in April 2018, was a big blow to the Houthis.

Since the beginning of 2018, Yemen's army and the Saudi-led coalition have opened new fronts inside Saada, the Houthis' main bastion that hosts their major arsenal of ballistic missiles and key leaders. The pressure in Saada has prevented the Houthis from sending reinforcements to other fronts, including the Red Sea which helped government forces to advance there.

The Houthis are increasing their ballistic missile attacks on Saudi Arabia to shore up the morale of their militiamen and to pretend they have the upper hand on the battlefield.

The United Nations has warned any operation aimed at seizing Hodeidah would disrupt the entry of aid shipments to Yemen. The threat of mass famine continues to loom over Yemen.[42]

While Yemeni legitimate forces march towards Hodeida, which is the most important port for the rebels, Iran is offering to negotiate on Yemen. Iran's tactic is based on selling what it losses, so Iran is ready to negotiate over Yemen because it has become a losing card. [43]

Iran has two main demands in order stop the fighting: to give the Houthis a share in the government and parliament seats, a share bigger than their size, and allowing the Houthis to keep their heavy weapons.[44]

Notes

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[10] Yemeni President arrives in Aden to oversee Battle for Hodeidah, Al Arabiya, and June 15, 2018.

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[15] VIDEO: Missiles meant to target Hodeidah ships left behind by fleeing Houthis, Al Arabiya, May 31, 2018.

[16] VIDEO: Missiles meant to target Hodeidah ships left behind by fleeing Houthis, Al Arabiya, May 31, 2018.

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[23] UN envoy to Yemen in Sanaa to discuss plans for Houthi withdrawal from Hodeidah, Al Arabiya, June 2, 2018.

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