

## **YEMEN: THE BATTLE OF HODEIDA**

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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.

Early last year, Yemen's army, backed by the Saudi-led coalition, launched a major military offensive 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.

Since 2015, the port of the city, controlled by the Houthis, was bombed by the Saudi-led coalition. On August 18, 2017, four cranes were destroyed at the port and several warehouses were damaged. On November 23, 2017, the authorities allowed the port to reopen for aid flights, in addition to Sanaa international airport.<sup>1</sup>

Hodeida is located on the Eastern coast of the Red Sea north to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, linking the Suez Canal and the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea.

About 1,500 ships, ten percent of global shipping traffic, pass through it every month, including four percent of the world's daily crude oil supply. The only alternative

route, around South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, is thousands of miles longer and much more expensive.<sup>2</sup>

The Gulf of Aden-Suez Canal trade route is particularly important for the Asian powers China and Japan and for Europe. China's and Japan's trade with the EU is mainly seaborne and therefore has to use the Gulf of Aden-Suez Canal route

### **Yemen's port city - Hodeidah**

Hodeidah with a population of 2.3 million 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.<sup>3</sup>

Yemen's port city of Hodeidah has a strategic importance:<sup>4</sup>

- 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.<sup>5</sup>
- 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 army's 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, among which Jabal Zuqar is the largest.

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. A UN Resolution under the seventh item prohibits delivering weapons to Yemen.<sup>6</sup>

### **The operation to liberate Hodeida**

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 western city of Hodeida, the last major coastal area under Houthi control.

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. At least 100 Houthis have been killed in fierce clashes with government forces or in airstrikes by Saudi- led coalition.

The operation was launched after Yemeni forces secured areas in the west and southwest of Taiz and cutting supply lines to Houthis that have suffered major blows in ever-shrinking pockets of land.

The Yemeni Joint Forces launched a wide operation from two axes towards Hodeida in the north and towards Al-Jarrahi and At 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 Al Houthi militants and are now marching towards Al Ameri and Al Wazyia regions.

The resumed offensive in Hodeida and Taiz comes as government troops gained control of a large amount of land west of the city of Taiz, important supply lines to Al Houthi militants who shell government troops on the Red Sea coastline.

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.

The battle coincided with a visit of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and his deputy Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar to the headquarters of the joint leadership 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, who stressed joint efforts to achieve the objectives of the Decisive Storm and Restoring Hope operations.

### **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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

### **Summary**

The May 2018 offensive is aimed at liberating the city of Hodeida, the last major coastal area under control of the Houthi militias.

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.<sup>11</sup>

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, 70 percent of which flow through the rebel-held port. The threat of mass famine continues to loom over Yemen.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Why is the Arab coalition's control of Yemen's port city Hodeidah important? Al Arabiya, May 30, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Tomi Oladipo, Why are there so many military bases in Djibouti? BBC, June 16, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Aden port is under the control of the legitimate government and where most of humanitarian aid and imports like food and oil come through it.

<sup>4</sup> Why is the Arab coalition's control of Yemen's port city Hodeidah important? Al Arabiya, May 30, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed Eleiba ,Yemen: The battle of Hodeidah, Ahram Online, June 1, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Why is the Arab coalition's control of Yemen's port city Hodeidah important? Al Arabiya, May 30, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Yemeni forces advance to within 20km of Houthi-held Hodeidah, Al Jazeera, May 29, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Yemeni forces advance to within 20km of Houthi-held Hodeidah, Al Jazeera, May 29, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Houthis trapped Hodeidah seaport in anticipation of coalition liberation: report, Al Arabiya, May 31, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Houthis trapped Hodeidah seaport in anticipation of coalition liberation: report, Al Arabiya, May 31, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Eleiba ,Yemen: The battle of Hodeidah, Ahram Online, June 1, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Houthis trapped Hodeidah seaport in anticipation of coalition liberation: report, Al Arabiya, May 31, 2018.