

The battle over Marib region - the “largest citadel of the republic”

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In Yemen hostilities have escalated since September 2021, claiming thousands of casualties on both sides. The Iran backed Houthis (Ansarullah) fighting to gain control of oil-rich Marib province - the last stronghold of government forces in northern Yemen. Marib is also geographically significant because it located at a crossroads between the northern regions and the southern Shabwa Governorate.

The Houthis have reportedly said they were tightening their grip around Marib city, adding it was “only a matter of time” until they seize it. Houthi spokesman Yahya Saree said on November 2, 2021, according to the Houthis' Al-Masirah TV channel, that the rebels were on the outskirts of Marib on several fronts and will not hesitate to move forward, until they liberate all that is left. ¹

The complete loss of Marib region would be a severe blow to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, would help solidify Houthi control over much of the country’s north and the province would be their winning card in any peace negotiations. ²

The Saudi led military coalition backing the government in Yemen said on November 2, 2021, that 115 Houthi fighters were killed and fourteen military vehicles were destroyed in air strikes in Al-Jawba, about 50 kilometers south of city of Marib and al-Kassara, 30 kilometers northwest of the city of Marib. Two days earlier the coalition said that more than 218 Houthi insurgents were killed in air strikes near Marib city. ³

The coalition has for the past three weeks reported almost daily air strikes around Marib city and claims it has killed about 2,200 Houthis in the Marib area. As a result of the intensive fighting the battle for Marib may have become the bloodiest in the past seven years of the Yemeni conflict.

The UN Security Council condemned on October 20, 2021, the Iran-backed Houthi militia's military operations in Marib province and called to cease hostilities in Marib province, end their siege of some districts and engage positively with diplomatic efforts to end the war. ⁴

Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdul-Salam accused the UN Security Council of bias. "The Security Council's adoption of the position of the aggressors is not new, and is a rude and blind bias," Abdul-Salam said. ⁵

The Houthi offensive

The Houthis began a major push to seize Marib in February 2021, and have renewed their offensive since September 2021 after a lull. ⁶

For the Houthis, Marib represents a potentially critical strategic point if they want to negotiate favorable terms with foreign powers in the future and impose control over northern Yemen. ⁷

Houthi Military Spokesman Yahya Saree recently announced on his Twitter account that the Ansarullah forces had gained 3,200 sq km in Marib and Shabwah. "Our forces managed to carry out Operation Spring of Victory, liberating the districts of Usaylan, Bayhan and Ain in Shabwah province, and the districts of Abedia and Hareb, as well as parts of the districts of Juba and Jabal Murad in Marib," he said. ⁸

He added that, in the course of fighting, the Houthi forces seized huge quantities of enemy arms, and wounded and captured hundreds of "Al-Qaeda and IS elements," terms the Houthis use to refer to forces fighting for the Yemeni government. ⁹

In September 2021 the Houthis reoriented their strategy for taking over the capital city of Marib province, also called Marib and the fighting intensified outside the city of Marib in October 2021.

For the Hadi government, the battle for Marib may be a matter of existential survival. The Hadi government and the Islah Party, its fighting partner in Marib, recognize that the city is their last main stronghold in the north, and they therefore consider it to be immensely important. ¹⁰

The focus of fighting in last weeks was on the Juba and Hareb districts, south of Marib city, where government forces pushed to expel the Houthis from areas they controlled during their latest incursions.

The Arab coalition began hitting Houthi targets in Abedia following the escalation in the militia's incursions. The Arab coalition said on October 18, 2021, that it carried out 38 operations targeting the Houthi militia in Abedia and the surrounding villages in the Yemeni governorate of Marib. The coalition said more than 150 militia members were killed and 13 Houthi vehicles destroyed in the operations.¹¹

The Houthis attacked on October 20, 2021, government troops in Juba in an attempt to break through to the city of Marib. The Houthis were forced to cease their attacks after suffering heavy losses and failing to make any progress, according to the coalition.¹²

The battle has been so critical to the two sides that both forces have suffered immense casualties, including the deaths of major leadership figures. According to reports from both sides, the Hadi government has seen the death of its director of the officers' affairs department, the chief of the military judiciary, the attorney general, the sixth district commander, and three commanders of the special forces, not to mention hundreds of other casualties.¹³

Likewise, the Houthis have suffered several thousand casualties in the battle and at least three Houthi senior field commanders were killed in fighting with government forces or in the coalition's airstrikes.

The UN and the humanitarian crisis in Yemen

Ongoing warfare in Marib, Al-Bayda, Shabwah and elsewhere in Yemen has created one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the world. The Marib, energy-rich region, has served as a safe haven for internally displaced people fleeing the fighting since the conflict began in 2014.

Marib city had between 20,000 and 30,000 inhabitants before the war but its population ballooned to hundreds of thousands as Yemenis fled frontline cities for its relative stability. But with about 139 refugee camps in the province, according to the government, hosting around 2.2 million people, many displaced civilians have become caught in the line of fire once again. Houthi victory over Marib could mean added humanitarian

catastrophe on top of the existing humanitarian crises throughout Yemen.

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The Houthi militants had intensified the bombing of areas north of Marib's Juba district after having captured the neighboring Jabal Murad district on October 28, 2021. The UN human rights office in Marib reported that the continuous escalation by the Iranian-backed Houthi militia on the villages and homes of citizens in the Juba district has killed and injured 300 civilians and displaced more than 10,000 families.¹⁵

According to Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator Ramesh Rajasingham, more than 20 million Yemenis, or two-thirds of the population, need assistance from aid agencies.¹⁶

In his briefing to the UN Security Council, Rajasingham said that 13 million people across the country were now receiving help from aid agencies. Rajasingham also warned that between four and five million people could see their food aid reduced between now and the end of the year.¹⁷

Summary

The oil rich Marib region is the last stronghold of the Yemeni government in northern Yemen and considered as the "largest citadel of the republic".

Yemeni Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, in remarks to the press during his visit to Cairo explained the importance of the region "who Controls Marib controls the fate of the country, the fate of the battle will determine the future of Yemen."¹⁸

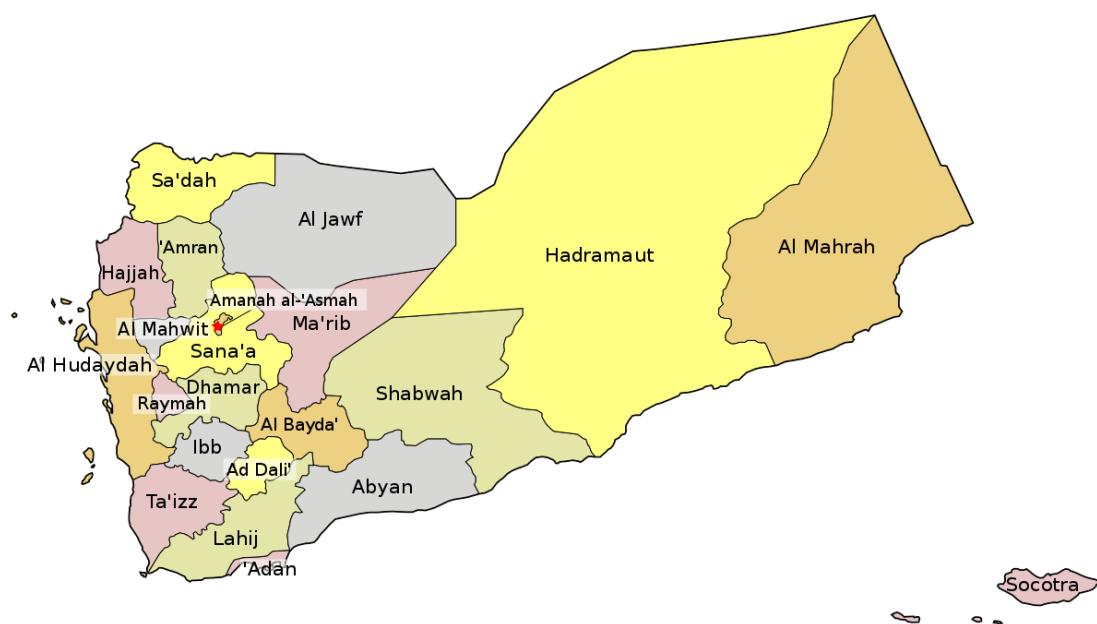
The Houthis have been fighting to regain control of Marib, from which they were expelled in 2017. Since February 2021, the disputed zone has been the main target of a major offensive by Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

Marib may be the most important episode in Yemen's civil war and the results of the battle for Marib could therefore dictate the end of the Yemeni conflict. Houthi control over Marib region would deprive the government of an essential resource, severely debilitating its ability to resist and the province would be their winning card in any peace negotiations.¹⁹

The Houthis vowed to press ahead with their military operations until they control the whole of Yemen. “Our military operations inside and outside Yemen will continue until the aggression is stopped, the siege is lifted, and foreign forces leave Yemen,” Mohammed Al-Bukhaiti, a Houthi leader, said on Twitter. ²⁰

The Yemeni war is part of a larger regional war between Iran and the Arab Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia and Yemeni Prime Minister blamed the escalation in fighting in Yemen on Tehran. “The hardline government in Iran is pushing the Houthis to further violence.”

Yemeni officials argue that international condemnations alone may not persuade the Houthis to change course, and call for tougher punitive measures against countries and organizations that offer the Houthis military, financial or political support.



[File:Governorates of Yemen named.svg - Wikimedia Commons](#) (copyright photo)

Notes:

¹ Saudi-led coalition says 115 rebels killed around Yemen's Marib, The New Arab, November 2, 2021.

² Yemen counters Houthi attacks in Shabwa province, Arab news, October 20, 2021.

³ Arab Coalition says 115 Houthis killed in airstrikes around Yemen's Marib, Al Arabiya, November 2, 2021.

⁴ Arab coalition strikes military sites in Houthi-held Sanaa, Arab news, October 20, 2021.

⁵ Arab Coalition: At least 165 Houthi militia members killed near Yemen's Marib, Al Arabiya, October 17, 2021.

⁶ More than 90 Houthis killed, 16 military vehicles destroyed in coalition strikes on Jubah and Al-Kassarah, Arab news, October 22, 2021.

⁷ Nabil Herati, without an exerted international peace effort, the siege on Marib could destroy the possibility of a unified Yemen, Fikra forum, July 9, 2021.

⁸ Haitham Nouri , Yemen: Fighting for the citadel, Ahram online, October 22, 2021.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nabil Herati, without an exerted international peace effort, the siege on Marib could destroy the possibility of a unified Yemen, Fikra forum, July 9, 2021.

¹¹ More than 150 Houthis killed, injured in Yemen's Abedia: Arab coalition, Arab news, October 18, 2021.

¹² Arab coalition strikes military sites in Houthi-held Sanaa, Arab news, October 20, 2021.

¹³ Nabil Herati, without an exerted international peace effort, the siege on Marib could destroy the possibility of a unified Yemen, Fikra forum, July 9, 2021.

¹⁴ Houthi Attacks Kill, Injure 300 Civilians in Southern Marib, Asharq Al Awsat, October 29, 2021.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Haitham Nouri , Yemen: Fighting for the citadel, Ahram online, October 22, 2021.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Key to conflict: How battle for Marib is crucial to Yemen war, France 24, September 28, 2021.

¹⁹ Haitham Nouri , Yemen: Fighting for the citadel, Ahram online, October 22, 2021.

²⁰ Yemen counters Houthi attacks in Shabwa province, Arab news, October 20, 2021.

