



مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث  
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# The Regional Battle of Marib

Case Analysis

Political Analysis Unit

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## Study Summary:

- The battle for Marib will not determine the winner and loser in Yemen; the legitimate government or the Houthi group; rather it will determine the winner and loser at the regional level, Iran or Saudi Arabia.
- It is difficult for the Houthis to control the strategic city of Marib for reasons related to the lack of a popular incubator, and the bloody history of Houthis and their conflicts with tribes that have allied with them since 2014, in addition to the fact that Marib is the last stronghold of the government and opponents of the Houthis in the north of the country - fleeing from the Houthi-controlled areas. So they will continue to fight, even if confrontations turned into a long-term factor of attrition for both parties.
- Two months since the Houthis started their battle in Marib indicates that the tribes and government forces were able to use the element of surprise, and the tremendous and rapid pressure that the Houthis relied on to control the governorate, which confirms the scenario that Houthis lose the battle is possible.
- The "Battle of Marib" proved that the international community has cards to put pressure on the Yemeni and Saudi governments, but it does not have cards to pressure the Houthis, especially after the "Biden administration" removed the Houthis from the US terrorist lists, stopped support for the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, and returned US aid to Houthi areas, despite credible reports confirming that Houthis have diverted foreign aid in favor of the war effort.<sup>[1]</sup> These American measures encouraged the Houthis to attack Marib and escalate the bombing campaign on Saudi Arabia.
- Therefore, from the Houthi's point of view, there is no justification for going to negotiations, if they are not able to impose their conditions as a victor.
- The initial failure of the US initiative that "Lenderking" presented to the Houthi leaders is due to the lack of pressure papers on Iran or the Houthis. Also, Washington's regional allies such as "the Sultanate of Oman" and "Qatar" may not be able to exert great pressure on the armed group to cease fire, except when the Houthis are granted international "privileges" or "recognition" before negotiations, or the issuance of a Security Council resolution replacing the resolution (2216).

In case of the Houthis' current response to the American initiative, any step by Washington towards a resolution that reflects (2216) will make it lose its ability to continue the file of resolving the conflict in Yemen, and the Arab Gulf countries will lose the trust of the Yemeni people.

- Even if the Houthis retreat from the battles in Marib, with material and human costs that they were inflicted, they will be much weaker than before, as most of the group's trained members were killed, and the anger of businessmen and residents in their areas of control increased due to the taxes that Houthis took from them. Also, this may lead to disagreements between the leaders of the group, and the likelihood of its division.

- If the Houthis withdraw their trained fighters from other fighting fronts in Al-Dhalea, Taiz, the western coast, and Hajjah to fight in Marib, government forces may be able to quickly control the areas under Houthis control easily, like what happened in west of Taiz, where government forces advanced towards the western areas and liberated several areas. The same thing happened in "Hajjah", in the north of the country.

If the forces facing the Houthis are able to unite under one command and bury their differences, then the Houthi control over these areas can be reversed and the legitimate government can impose its control on them. However, the obstacle to uniting these forces, including those affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council and the "Joint Forces", is difficult.

- Although the Houthi's control of the city of Ma'rib" is far-fetched, a change in the power factors of the government forces and the Houthis' access to a corridor through the tribal areas will enable them to control the city of Marib, and it will be a heavy loss for the legitimate government and its representation in any upcoming negotiations. Also, many of the loyalties will change and the parties will go towards individual agreements with the Houthis.

In the region, this will be considered as a victory for Iran over Saudi Arabia, which failed in its first foreign battles since the beginning of the current century, and a proxy regime for Iran will be established in the Arabian Peninsula.

- Contrary to what is rumored that Saudi Arabia wants to get out of the Yemen war at any cost that remains just estimates. Saudi will seek a political solution that protects its role and influence in the country, and preserves its face as a regional power against its traditional opponent Iran. So it is difficult for Saudi to withdraw at the present time without a peace agreement that satisfies the Saudi leadership.

## Introduction:

In February 2021, the Houthis renewed their attack on the Marib Governorate (eastern Yemen), at a time when the new American diplomacy was trying to achieve a breakthrough in the Yemeni war and to bring its parties to the negotiating table with the entry of that war its sixth year.

The Houthis are fighting to improve their position in the upcoming and expected negotiations, while the legitimate government backed by the Arab Coalition is defending its last strongholds, as the Southern Transitional Council forces control the southern provinces, and the western coast is controlled by the paramilitary forces of Tariq Saleh, the nephew of former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who was killed by the Houthis in 2017. Both entities are backed by the United Arab Emirates, which considers them to be local agents to implement its strategy in Yemen and obstruct any rapprochement with the legitimate government.

The Houthis escalate their attacks on the oil-rich province of Marib days after the American administration announced its intention to remove the armed group from the list of terrorism, and appointed the first US special envoy for Yemen, Timothy Lenderking, in order to push the diplomatic work forward to end the war. But US pushed its relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the brink of tension after President Joe Biden announced the cessation of support for the offensive operations of the Arab coalition against Houthis, and the prohibition of arms sales to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to pressure on Saudi officials to accept a comprehensive peace agreement. Saudi Arabia presented an initiative for peace that the Houthis are still maneuvering about it to get more time to try to take over Marib.

## The Importance of the "Battle of Marib" for Local Actors and Their External Supporters:

The city of Marib, which is 170 km from Sana'a, derives its importance from its geographical location linking the oil-rich eastern and southern governorates, its pivotal role in the war raging in the country, and its change into a "paradise" in the midst of the war, as it flourished over the past years and witnessed a demographic and economic leap. Its population increased from a few hundreds of thousands (nearly 300 thousand people) before 2015, to a few million, the lowest official estimate says that the population of Marib reached more than two million people,<sup>[2]</sup> so it became a "safe and stable area." This is something that has not happened in any other governorate, including those that have remained far from armed confrontations, such as Hadramaut and Mahrah.

The war in Marib governorate comes from the standpoint of the governorate's importance in changing the balance of military forces. From the Houthis' viewpoint, it is considered the last battle, while the legitimate government considers it as a "struggle for survival."

The Houthis want to control the sprawling desert province for multiple military, economic, and social/tribal goals. The governorate of Marib has natural gas revenues and represents a major powerhouse of exports, as the country gets \$ 700 million annually from revenues of Marib.<sup>[3]</sup> The Houthis can also reach other oil-rich areas through Marib, such as "Masila" in the neighboring Hadramout governorate, where 80% of Yemen's oil reserves is located; and "Balhaf" in Shabwa, where there is the largest investment project in Yemen, the Liquefying Natural Gas.

Yemen gets annual revenue of more than \$ 2.2 billion from exporting crude oil.<sup>[4]</sup> The government's share of crude oil exports with foreign oil companies constitutes about 70% of the state's general budget resources, 63% of the country's total exports and 30% of the GDP.<sup>[5]</sup>

The Houthis consider the city of Marib a military target, as it is the main military base for the Yemeni government forces. In 2015, when the operations of the Saudi-backed Arab Coalition began, Marib was a gathering point for soldiers and military leaders, who refused the Houthi control of the military and security institutions after they took control of the capital, Sana'a (September 2014). The governorate's deserts were home to the formation of the "National Army" and "popular resistance", which are currently considered a buffer against the Houthis.

The Houthis also see that the governorate of Marib is a break in their methodology towards the Yemeni tribes.[6] They see that their control of Marib and subjugating the tribes there will enable them to subjugate tribes in other governorates under their control, and to confirm the rule of the armed group that always has fears about tribal rebellions, despite the group's imposition of its hegemony over their areas for years. In addition to historical concerns, as tribes in the central and eastern governorates, including Marib, al-Jawf and al-Bayda, stood against the (royal) imamate rule, which the Houthis are accused of trying to restore, instead of the republican system.[7]

The Houthis believe that the new American administration and its diplomatic efforts alongside the United Nations will build an initiative to "end the war" on the basis of the powers' control on the ground. Therefore, they see that controlling Marib will weaken - if not ends - the legitimate government and gives them a greater authority over the rest of the parties. And it makes the "group" a dominant force over the rest of the political and social forces and components in the country's political future, similar to "Hezbollah" in Lebanon.

The importance of "Marib" for the legitimate government is highlighted as it is the last area where it has a real and complete control. The UAE-funded forces control most of the other southern governorates that are nominally under the government's control. Marib also represents the government's official authority and military base, where government forces are being trained and the command of military operations against the Houthis locates. Marib played a pivotal role in receiving soldiers and military leaders who fled the "revenge" campaign launched by the STC, after the events of August 2019 in Aden, when it took control of the city with Emirati support.

Although the legitimate government considers it a battle of “to be or not to be”, its allies - presumed - who are fighting the Houthis, do not believe the same. The "Southern Transitional Council" believes that the "battle of Marib" is not its battle. On the contrary, the STC considers it an opportunity to destroy its opponent (the legitimate government), revenge for the governorate's role in 2019 events, and the possibility of conducting negotiations with the Houthis. "The fall of Marib may accelerate international talks between the north and the south, as this will lead to a situation in which the Southern Transitional Council largely controls the south and the Houthis control most of the north," said the STC Chairman Aidarous al-Zubaidi. In this case, it would be logical to hold direct talks between the controlling parties."<sup>[8]</sup>

In the western coast, where the "Joint Forces", led by Tariq Saleh, who receives funds and arms from the Emirates, the declared position is that those forces supports the government forces in Marib. The Joint Forces have sent a "convoy of food aid" to the army in Marib,<sup>[9]</sup> and said it may send a battalion to fight alongside the Army, but the situation is different on the ground. The Houthis and the "Joint Forces" signed an agreement to cease all hostilities two days after the Houthis began their attack in Marib. <sup>[10]</sup> This new armistice - in addition to the Stockholm Agreement - enabled the Houthis to withdraw their well-trained fighters from fronts in Hodeidah to fight in Marib. Also, "Tariq Saleh" has ambition to be a party in any upcoming negotiations on Yemen. Therefore, in March, he announced a political council for the so-called "national resistance" under his leadership.

The stance of the UAE agents is negative towards the government, although the behavior of the Houthis during the war years confirms that they will not stop in Marib, but rather their control will extend to other governorates in the south and the western coast.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia shares with the "legitimate government" the same fate regarding the battle of Marib. The Houthis' control of the last stronghold of the legitimate government means declaring Saudi Arabia's loss of the war in Yemen, and this will have an impact on its national security,

with the presence of a proxy armed group affiliated with its opponent, Iran, on its southern borders. This is why it resumed providing special air support for battles in Marib,<sup>[11]</sup> to prevent the Houthis from obtaining a foothold in the strategic city.

As for Iran, it looks at the "Battle of Marib" as a confirmation of the strength of its Houthi allies in Yemen. It is also a confirmation of Iran's growing influence in the Arabian Peninsula. Tehran also considers "Marib" as the main military base for Saudi Arabia in Yemen, and the Houthi's control will be a victory for the Iranian-led resistance axis. Indeed, it sees that the Houthi's control of the city of Marib is a change in the balance of power in Western Asia, as the Saudis will lose their most important base in Yemen.<sup>[12]</sup> The Houthis are continuing the battle of Marib because they are confident about the constant support with weapons from their ally, Iran. Without the Iranian weapons - especially ballistic missiles and drones - the Houthis will repeatedly think about continuing a battle that may lead to the dwindling of their weapons stockpile.

## Changing Factors of the "Battle of Ma'rib"

Despite the continuation of the military operations on more than 30 fronts, both sides have stopped making progress since 2018. Until the beginning of 2020, the Houthis were able to make progress east of the capital, Sana'a, in "Nehm" district, and controlled the Hazm area of al-Jawf that leads to Marib governorate. The Houthis tried to make progress towards the city of Marib at that time, but they did not succeed, despite reinforcing their front across al-Bayda governorate, adjacent to Marib, after defeating the tribes in Radman Al Awadh district in al-Bayda governorate that was led by Sheikh Yasser Al-Awadi, a leader in the General People's Congress party, who was close to Houthis until they killed Ali Abdullah Saleh in December 2017.

In the following months, the Houthis were preparing for the new round of battles, as they recruited thousands of people, most of them children and adolescents, and gathered intelligence on the military leadership in Marib governorate and training camp areas.

They communicated with tribal sheikhs to ensure smooth passage through their areas to the city of Marib. In addition to imposing large levies on merchants and businessmen, and additional taxes and customs estimated at two billion dollars annually, which have turned into an effort for war instead of handing over the salaries of government employees in their areas of control, as they have not received their salaries since 2016.

On February 4, 2021, the Houthis began their new offensive in Marib through three fighting axes: “Sana’a governorate borders, Al-Jawf governorate borders, and Al-Bayda governorate borders” at a time when a number of fighting fronts in Taiz, Dhalea, the western coast, Saada, and Hajjah stopped. For Marib, all Houthi forces gather against it from all directions.<sup>[13]</sup> The "Taiz" and "Hajjah" fronts moved later, weeks after the Houthis began their offensive.

The recent battle of Marib was designed to destroy many soldiers, money and military equipment. Thousands were killed last year, and the death toll during the first month of the Houthi attack exceeded 1000 fighters. Naturally, the party that launches the attack suffers heavy losses, and it is vulnerable to ambushes and direct targeting. Therefore, the Houthis lost a lot in this battle. The mountains and deserts of Marib turned into a "black hole" that swallows dozens of Houthi fighters on a daily basis.

The situation on the battlefield changes periodically, with 'hit-and-run' battles. It is not possible to determine an instantaneous course for the battle, as the map of control changes in the three axes. The battle turned into a war of attrition and "breaking the bone". Nevertheless, there are variable factors that, if a defect occurs in one of them, may affect the outcome of the war in favor of one of the parties, unless the battle will continue to be for exhaustion.

Comparison Point	Houthi Group	Government
<b>Fighters</b>	<p>The Houthi armed group suffers from a crisis in trained fighters. During the last two years, the Houthi armed group has relied on «children» and «adolescents» who receive simple training before joining the fighting fronts.</p> <p>The Houthis use the humanitarian situation and the living conditions of the population in their areas of control - which are the most densely populated - to push young men to fight in their ranks in exchange for receiving periodic salaries and access to humanitarian aid for their families - usually provided by international organizations.</p>	<p>The national army has well-trained forces. It also has the ability to pay hundreds of trained fighters from other military sectors in governorates such as Hadramout, Shabwa, Mahrah, and Abyan. However, the movement of these forces depends on an understanding with the Arab coalition to ensure that the «transitional council» does not exploit the situation and seize it as an opportunity to control those provinces.</p> <p>Moreover, despite the Houthis' transfer of their trained forces from the fighting fronts in Hodeidah, Taiz, Dhale and Lahj, government forces in those areas did not launch attacks on the Houthis to reduce pressure on «Marib», except for the army's movements in Taiz city to break the siege imposed by the Houthis. Government forces advanced rapidly there.</p>
<b>Social incubator</b>	<p>The overwhelming majority of Houthi fighters belong to governorates other than Marib and from outside tribes, so they are considered, in the tribal custom, as aggressors. Therefore the tribes in Houthi areas refused to push their youth to fight in Marib.<sup>[14]</sup></p>	<p>Most of Marib tribes,<sup>[15]</sup> in all their regions, believe that the "Houthis" are aggressors in their areas, and that the Houthis seek to restore the "Zaydi imamate" to their regions, to control their wealth, and change their customs. Likewise, tribal cooperation and the local authority in Marib, represented by Sheikh "Sultan Al-Arada", the governor of Marib,</p>

	<p>So the fighters in the ranks of the Houthis are known to attack other tribes, and this affects their morale and the basis of their fight.</p> <p>It is difficult for the Houthis to obtain a popular incubator in Marib, for several reasons: The difference in the sect, as most of the tribes in Marib belong to the Shafi'i school of thought, and the Houthis adopt the «Zaidya.» The Zaydi imamate in Yemen has a bad history with Marib tribes.</p>	<p>and their participation in administration, and tribesmen from several governorates, «Sana'a, Rima, Amran, Dhamar, Taiz, Shabwa..etc.» Their regions - contributed to pushing these tribes to support the legitimate government.</p>
<p><b>Financial Costs</b></p>	<p>War in Marib has high costs, not only human losses, but also money and weapons.</p> <p>The Houthis are suffering from a financial crisis that worsens the fighting course. The sources of financing their war efforts are no longer sufficient, as they depend on many resources, most notably additional taxes, customs and levies they impose on companies, commercial establishments, traders in their areas of control. In 2019, the Houthis were able to collect nearly two billion dollars - according to international reports. They also get revenues from the black markets they create in their areas of control, including the "oil derivatives market". The partial ban on the entry of fuel ships to the port of Hodeidah, which started last year and is still,</p>	<p>The legitimate government suffers from the same problem. Unlike the Houthis, the government is obligated to grapple with the bad economic situation in its regions and to pay salaries of employees. In addition to the presence of corruption in some of its departments <sup>[17]</sup>. The salaries of soldiers in the military brigades that are fighting against the Houthis in Marib and other provinces, have not received salaries for more than a year.</p> <p>The active participation of Saudi Arabia in this battle may push it to hand over the salaries of the forces throughout the battle.</p>

	<p>helped prevent the Houthis from obtaining tens of millions of dollars to fund the “war effort.”<sup>[16]</sup></p> <p>The Houthis continue to impose «taxes» causing anger among merchants and businessmen, who may find themselves between two difficult options; to continue paying for Houthis or to withdraw their investments outside the Houthi areas.</p>	
<p><b>Armament</b></p>	<p>The Houthis are fighting with specific weapons, some of which they inherited from the regular army of former regime, after they invaded the capital Sana’a in 2014 and took control of the military stores in Sana’a and other provinces. They also obtain weapons from "arms dealers" that arrive in the country in a complex way to bypass the United Nations port monitoring mechanism that operates under the auspices of the Saudi-led Arab coalition. As for the technology of specific weapons and advanced weapons such as ballistic missiles and drones, they obtain them from Iran. Tehran repeatedly denies these accusations, but international reports confirm that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards supplied Houthis with these weapons.</p>	<p>Government forces and tribes are fighting with personal weapons and few heavy weapons that they obtained from Saudi Arabia. Government forces frequently complain of "lack of ammunition", but government forces enjoy a qualitative air coverage from the Saudi Air Force.</p>

The most prominent obstacle facing the Houthis in achieving progress towards Marib is the "lack of a popular incubator" for the group in Marib. They tried to overcome this obstacle by conducting an agreement with "the tribes of Marib" to guarantee safe passage for the Houthis and stand on "neutrality" in exchange for giving them 60% of the governorate's revenues, and positions in the local authority in Marib, and stopping Houthi dispersing in their tribal areas. However, the tribes no longer trust the Houthis, especially after their dealings with the tribes that allowed their passage to Sana'a in the summer of 2014, as most of tribal loyalists to Houthis were killed or assassinated. [18] The Houthis also occupied their areas and appointed their own sheikhs to replace the legitimate sheikhs of tribes, who got positions according to the tribal norms. What happened to sheikhs of tribes of al-Bayda and al-Jawf, the two neighboring provinces, which have many common points with Marib, including religious sect, customs and traditions, was a clear evidence of how the Houthis deal with tribes.

**The military operations in Marib during the past two months make it clear that the result of the battle is “zero,” as the following can be observed:**

- The Houthis move in small groups and launch separate attacks, given that the battle and its plans are in the hands of field commanders, who derive their orders from their high command, which shares an operations room with Iranian advisors to manage and plan the battle, and rely on reconnaissance aircrafts to know the locations of government forces before launching attacks
- Government forces rely on ambushes to hunt the Houthis, and to take up their positions to repel the attacks launched by the Houthi fighters, and to prevent their infiltration.
- The Houthis are pushing the fighters, regardless of the number of dead and wounded in their ranks.

- The "Saudi Air Force" provides a superior ability to deter Houthi attacks, and the coordination between the movement of the Yemeni ground forces and the Royal Air Force appears to be extremely high - for the first time during the war - which causes heavy losses to the Houthi group, and prevents false raids on the National Army, as happened in the beginning of this war. The desert areas that lead to the city of Marib are open areas that make it easy for airplanes to catch them. Therefore, the Houthis renewed their offer to stop targeting Saudi territory in exchange for stopping air attacks,<sup>[19]</sup> which escalated dramatically after the US president Joe Biden announced that the Houthis would be removed from the US list of terrorism.<sup>[20]</sup>
- Government forces and tribesmen managed to absorb the Houthi attack, which started violently, and in recent weeks the Houthis have slowed down or failed to achieve significant progress.
- Both sides see that the battle will continue until a complete victory is achieved, despite the human and material costs. The Houthis appear to be paying the heaviest costs.

## The Battle of Marib Impact on Yemen's Future:

The impact of the "Battle of Marib" goes beyond the issue of reaching a "political solution to end the conflict. Its impact extends to the future of Yemen in the coming years. There are three expected scenarios of the battle.

The first: The Houthis entry into the city of Marib.

The Second: Confronting the Houthis and preventing them from reaching the city of Marib.

The third: An agreement between the Houthis and the legitimate government to stop the war.

### **First: The Houthis entry into the city of Marib:**

The first scenario is a far-fetched one, but it can be achieved in the event that the Houthis make a breakthrough to changing factors, with the need of the armed group to obtain a tribal incubator that accepts "tribal neutrality" agreement that guarantees a safe passage for Houthis to Marib. However, the Houthis will not be able to impose their control over the governorate, as they will be exposed to constant attacks; and perhaps small battles with tribes that refuse the Houthis presence. Tribes may blow up oil and gas facilities in the governorate to destabilize the Houthis, which will cost the Houthis a lot.

By controlling Marib, the Houthis will be able to secure the capital, Sana'a, and put an end to the presence of government forces in Nehm through cutting off the supply lines to those forces from the north. By this way, the Houthis would take control of most of the northern governorates, open the road toward "Shabwa" and "Hadramout", and divide southern Yemen into two halves, to begin their battles towards the areas under control of the Southern Transition Council, and areas under the control of the "Joint Forces" in the west of the country. If this happens, the largest displacement crisis in Yemen will occur, with the possible departure of two million displaced people, most of whom had already fled from Houthi areas during the years of the war. But it is not known where their new destination will be. The losing of Marib will also be a very heavy loss for the legitimate government and will affect its position in any upcoming negotiations, many loyalties will change and the parties will seek individual agreements with the Houthis, as the head of the Southern Transitional Council said in a speech. This will make the Houthi domination of the country's future permanent. The Houthis' control of Marib and their domination of the whole Yemen will create a permanent Iranian presence in Yemen through its proxy. Riyadh will not be able to pass the Iranian presence or find solutions to it in the near future. Saudi Arabia wants to secure its territory against Houthi missiles and bomb-laden drones, and to keep Houthis them away from Iran. While the first one can be achieved by stopping the Houthi attacks, there is no a specific measure to make Houthis abandon the Iranian regime, except if Tehran and Riyadh sign a "no aggression and understanding agreement," but that is still far-fetched.

## **Second: The failure of Houthis in Marib:**

This is a possible scenario, if the changing factors of the legitimate government continue to remain stable, and military reinforcements from the governorates continue to reach the front lines, and if financial and arms support and air coverage from Riyadh continue, the battle will remain constant in the current front lines.

If the Houthis fail in this "battle" this may quickly change the map of the war in Yemen. The Houthis were forced to throw a lot of their important military and human resources into the battle of Marib, which means that the group is losing hundreds of fighters, including well-trained, while they face challenges on other important fronts in Taiz, al-Jawf, al-Dhale and Hodeidah, and other fronts may escalate.

Also, if the forces facing the Houthis were able to unite under one command and bury differences, then the Houthis control over those areas could be weakened and the legitimate government would impose its control. However, the uniting of those forces, including forces affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council and the Joint Forces in the Western Coast is difficult.

The failure of the Houthis in this battle, despite the material and human costs, may provoke widespread disagreements within the group's leadership and may lead to its division. The influence within the state's institutions under the control of the Houthi leaders in Sana'a and other governorates was a reason for previous disagreements.<sup>[21]</sup>

At the same time, the Houthis failure in this battle and the state of weakness they are suffering and the huge losses may push tribesmen in areas under the Houthis control to think of "uprising against the de facto authority of the armed group. The moving of Taiz front (central Yemen) confirmed the impact of battles in Marib on the Houthis, as the National Army and Popular Resistance were able to restore vast areas, which had been besieged by the Houthis since 2016.

The battles in Taiz proved that there is a social support for the Army and a popular cohesion that had not happened before.

This resulted in the fall of many areas under the Houthis control after pro-Houthis fighters who belong to the same areas have surrendered to commanders of military units belonging to the same areas.<sup>[22]</sup>

The Houthi leaders may try to pre-empt the repercussions of their defeat in Marib by acting pragmatically with the international community efforts to achieve an end to the war in the country, this seems to be clear in their engagement with US diplomatic moves in Yemen. But they will be in a much weaker position than they were before the latest battle of Marib.

If there is no societal uprising against the Houthis and the group continues its war on Marib, new balances may be created in the region.

Likewise, the Houthis reaction to the "American plan", their refusal to stop the attack on Marib, despite the expected humanitarian crisis, and the clash with the international community over the issue of "Safer tanker" and the Security Council may issue a resolution allowing a limited intervention to save the oil tanker in the Red Sea.<sup>[23]</sup>

### **Third: Reaching an agreement with Houthis:**

Before the latest battle of Marib, the Houthis presented a proposal to stop attacks on the city of Marib, but it was rejected by the legitimate government and the local authority. It was noted that the terms of the Houthi proposal were incapacitating, not an agreement between two forces. The proposal presented to the United Nations envoy to Yemen Griffiths includes "nine points" which are summarized as follows: sharing oil and gas revenues in Marib, not to use Marib for military operations against Houthis, the release of Houthi prisoners in Marib, and the employment of the group's loyalists in government institutions.<sup>[24]</sup>

After the government refused, the Houthis tried to make agreements with the local tribes in Marib, but they failed to make change due to the "lack of a popular incubator" for the group.

## The Battle of Marib Impact on International Efforts to End the War in Yemen:

Undoubtedly, the "Battle of Marib" affects the international plans and drive to end the war in Yemen. Regardless of the scenario to end the war, the United Nations and the countries concerned with reconciliation in Yemen should change their plans that they adopt to force the two parties to achieve a peace agreement. Therefore the US envoy for Yemen, Timothy Lenderking, and the UN envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, will focus on an immediate ceasefire in Marib before starting a process to reach a complete ceasefire all over Yemen.

The two envoys will also encourage the continuation of the background negotiations which are taking place between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis to reach an agreement to cease the fire exchange between the two parties.

It seems that "Lenderking" has come a long way and ended the four years of isolation that Washington imposed against the Houthis by a fruitless "secret" meeting with head of Houthi negotiators, Mohamed Abdul-Salam, in Muscat on February 26, 2021. Lenderking is still in the stage of "tactics" and has not developed a specific strategy or vision to end the war in Yemen. He announced that he has presented a vision for a ceasefire to Houthi leaders,<sup>[25]</sup> but the Houthis responded quickly by rejecting it,<sup>[26]</sup> while the legitimate government announced that it was dealing positively with the US initiative. The Houthis believe that "controlling Marib" should precede any peace negotiations. Therefore, Lenderking believes that the lack of an outcome of the "Battle of Marib" and the continuation of the battle without a way to "measure" who will win it complicates the US and the United Nation final plan to end the war.

The initiative of the United States and the United Nations refers to an immediate ceasefire in Yemen; lifting the ban on Sana'a airport and the port of Hodeidah; and a commitment to start consultations followed by what Lenderking calls a "dual track" approach, referring to political talks and humanitarian relief.<sup>[27]</sup>

## **There are some things that can be observed to know the complexity that collides with Lenderking and Griffiths in Yemen.**

The Houthi attack on Marib places the new US administration in a very critical position as it comes after the Houthis were removed from the US list of foreign terrorist organizations. This was considered a goodwill gesture toward the Houthis. Also after the removal from the terror list, the Houthis stepped up their attacks on Saudi Arabia and the number of drones and ballistic missiles that the Houthis fired at Saudi Arabia amounted to more than "40" drones and ballistic missiles<sup>[28]</sup>

The Houthi attack put the "United Nation "and the international community in critical situation as they sought with all their strength to stop the Arab coalition attack on Hodeida and reached the "Stockholm Agreement" in 2018 under the pretext of fears of a humanitarian crisis in case the government and forces loyal to it took control of the vital port. The same thing is in Marib, where the escalation of fighting threatens to displacement tow million displaced people in 124 displacement camps and it is not known, where their next destination will be.

Lenderking called on the Houthis to intensify their consultations with Saudi Arabia through virtual consultations. Indeed Saudi Arabia raised its representation in those consultations and included Saudi ambassador Muhammad Al Jaber to hold consultations with Mohamed Abdul Salam.

According to the media, Saudi Arabia is focusing on the security of its borders and stopping the continuous Houthi bombing on the kingdom and its oil installation. The attack on the port of Ras Tanura in March 7, 2021 represented the height of Saudi fears that Iran or allied Iraqi militias<sup>[29]</sup> might have participated in the bombing, despite the Houthi endorsement of the attack was carried out with ballistic missiles and booby-trapped drones. The Kingdom also demands a buffer zone on its borders and that Houthis abandon Iran.<sup>[30]</sup>

The Houthis want to stop attacks by the Saudi-led Coalition in Yemen, especially after heavy losses the Houthis were inflicted during the battle of Marib,

and to open the way for commercial aircrafts, and to stop what they call a blockade against the ports under their control. <sup>[31]</sup>

The United States, the United Nations and the influential countries in the Yemen's file are pushing towards the success of the Saudi-Houthi consultations, which, according to the United States, have become more desirable for a political solution than they were six months ago.<sup>[32]</sup> The two parties may reach an agreement on "urgent needs" rather than demands of each party, so the United States will ensure the continued support for Saudi Arabia in defending its lands, training its forces and deploying Patriot batteries, in addition to getting a Houthi pledge not to bomb and penetrate Saudi territories in exchange for stopping the air attacks; and then moving towards a new stage by getting the legitimate government involved in the agreement,<sup>[33]</sup> as happened in the "Dhahran Al-Janoub" agreements between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia in 2016, which collapsed months later despite the progress that has been made.<sup>[34]</sup>

**Pressure Cards:** The United States and the international community have cards to put pressure on Saudi Arabia and Yemen's government, but they do not have pressure cards on the Houthis, who increased their attacks on Marib and escalated against Saudi Arabia. Biden's administration retracted the most important card to pressure on the Houthis when it removed the group from the lists of foreign terrorist organizations. On contrary, the Biden's administration is rushing to resume negotiations on the "Iranian nuclear agreement" using the removal of the Houthis from the lists of foreign terrorist organizations as a good intention gesture, to which the Houthi group and Iran responded with more attacks on Marib and an escalation against Saudi Arabia.

This means that any mechanism for implementing any peace agreement that begins with a ceasefire in Marib, will be mistrusted. The UN experience regarding the implementation of the Hodeidah agreement in 2016 with limited international influence on the behaviors of Houthis indicates that the implementation of any agreement should be preceded by a military victory.

In an attempt to impose pressure on the Houthis, the United States imposed sanctions on two Houthi leaders in response to the Houthis continued attack on Marib and their escalation against Saudi Arabia,<sup>[35]</sup>

but such decision had a little impact on the Houthis. The failure of the international community to pressure on the Houthis to allow the United Nation team to access to decaying FSO Safer tanker off Yemen's coast in the Red Sea<sup>[36]</sup> for maintenance illustrates the lack of pressure cards against Houthis to stop playing the game of "evasiveness" and to respond to the risk of spilling more than a million barrels of oil into the sea water.

The Houthi attack on Marib proved that they do not want to achieve peace and reach an agreement that ends the war. So the resentment of the Yemeni and the international communities against the Houthis is increasing.

The battle of Marib may be a turning point for the Biden's administration by focusing the US diplomatic efforts on the necessity of implementing the three well-known references: the Gulf Initiative and its implementation mechanism, the 2216 resolution, and the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference(2014).

### **The Economic Strategy:**

The Biden administration's approach to Yemen lacks the most important factor to move forward; an economic strategy to improve the purchasing ability of Yemen and cutting off the way before warlords, who subsist on war economy. The Biden administration could help improve the purchasing power of Yemen through the following:<sup>[37]</sup>

- 1) Increasing supply and reducing the cost of basic commodities, fuel and medicines through increasing imports, ending monopoly on markets and subsidizing agricultural products in which half of the population work.
- 2) Stabilizing the local currency and increasing household income through monetary and fiscal policy reforms, as the Yemeni riyal lost more than half of its value against the US dollar.

A weak currency exacerbates food insecurity and the population's disability to purchase basic commodities, which pushes civilians to fight with the Houthis and other parties to keep their families survive. Although humanitarian assistance saves lives, it does not change the economic and political calculations of combatants. In short, the basic incentives of the war economy must change, so the Houthis stop relying on them to recruit fighters and invest in their misfortunes .

## **The Battle of Marib Impact on Other Active Players:**

The results provided by the battle of Marib are not reflected on Yemen alone, but rather on the countries policies toward the war in Yemen and the support of the local parties, as well as on the international parties and their influence in the region, especially in the Arabian Peninsula.

### **Saudi Arabia:**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia presented an initiative to end the war in Yemen, which is very similar in its main terms to the US initiative and it is based on the following:

A- A nationwide ceasefire under the supervision of the United Nations

B- The reopening of Sana'a International Airport and the port of Hodeida to oil ships, given that revenues should be delivered to the Central Bank in Hodeida in accordance with the Stockholm Agreement.

C- The beginning of negotiations between the Yemeni parties. The Yemeni government welcomed the initiative, while the Houthis said it "does not include anything new." However, after an intervention by the Sultanate of Oman, the Houthis sent their conditions to be added to Saudi and the US-UN initiatives.<sup>[38]</sup>

The Houthis ask for an end to the air campaign before ending the ground battles and the unconditional reopening of Hodeida port and Sana'a airport. The first condition means stopping the air superiority of the government in the battles in Marib, which will accelerate the Houthis' control of the city.

The Houthis apply the proverb that says "negotiate during progresses." Instead of forcing the Houthis to stop fighting in Marib, the Saudi Arabia, through its initiative, is trying to persuade its Houthi enemies to end the war in which the Houthis believe that they are winning.

Thus, if the Houthis halt attacks on Marib and engage in negotiations, it will be because they could not achieve major advance on the ground. If the Coalition stops the airstrikes before Houthis stop the ground offensive, the Houthis will have more access to the city and control its oil and gas facilities. Then Saudi Arabia would have lost the military campaign, which has entered its seventh year.

### **Iran:**

For Iran, the Houthi's victory in Marib will mean Saudi Arabia 'loss in the first face to face proxy battle in Yemen, and Iran will increase its influence in the region, especially with approaching new negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program. In the event that the Houthis enter into negotiations for a trade to stop the attack on Marib, it will ensure the presence of a strong proxy, and in all cases Iran will achieve victory, according to the proposed solutions.

### **The Sultanate of Oman:**

The Sultanate of Oman is the main mediator to end the war in Yemen.<sup>[39]</sup> It seems that Oman sees the end of the war in Yemen is approaching and the achievement of progress in peace initiatives is immanent. The Sultanate is interested in the presence of a strong party in Yemen that can stop Saudi and Emirati interference that affects its interests. It considers the Houthis and their hostility against the two Gulf States as a party that is capable to obstruct the Saudi and Emirati interventions in light of fragmentation of parties supporting the legitimate government.

The Sultanate of Oman considers the battle of Marib as a last attempt to know the main forces in Yemen's political future and it is trying to preserve the current main force (the Houthis and the legitimate government) because adding other local forces will further complicate the Yemeni scene as it may result in pro-UAE entities.

### **Britain:**

Britain sees that ending the Yemeni crisis in any way is an opportunity for a wider relationship in the Arab Gulf, and ensuring the security of its Gulf allies while the United States is presenting a negative message. The United Kingdom is seeking to obtain large Gulf investments, especially amid the decline in the economy due to the Coronavirus epidemic spread and UK exit from the European Union. Therefore, Britain has no problem with sending troops to Yemen, if a peaceful solution is reached, something that it had previously opposed.<sup>[40]</sup> The battle of Marib will determine the British ability to ease tension in the region and amazing its allies in the Arab region, particularly with the withdrawal of the United States.

### **The United States:**

With the arrival of Joe Biden to the White House and his focus on the Iranian nuclear file, the Yemeni file, for Washington, turned into just a negotiation paper. It is not a special pressure card after America removed the Houthi group from the lists of terrorist organizations, but a US means to show a good will towards the Iranian regime, with paying attention to their Saudi allies, who consider the Yemeni file as one of the most sensitive issues in the relationship between Riyadh and Washington.

Despite the appointment of a special US envoy to Yemen, the Biden administration does not have any clear strategy to stop the war as it promised, rather it increased Iran's appetite for a great legacy that America left in the region.

## Conclusion:

The Houthis used to fight their battles under various justifications that are usually made prior to any local battle according to their urgent tactical need. The Houthis justifications are ideological (Islam victory and the liberation of Al-Quds), social (defending the tribal honor), economic (breaking the blockade) and other justifications related to the feelings of Yemeni and sovereignty (ending the Saudi tutelage). In every stage of their wars to subjugate the Yemeni governorates, the Houthis apply some of those justifications.

While Houthis are tickling the Arab feelings with their slogan “Death to America, Death to Israel”, they are also tickling the international media with slogans such as (combating terrorism), as they did so in al-Bayda, or slogans to tickle human rights groups by revealing some of the economic damages and repercussions of famine caused by the war, and covering up their war on Marib under the slogan (ending the fuel crisis), despite Marib supplies them with oil and gas at the official price. They also exploit the public discontent with the Coalition’s mistakes to plan for battles in Shabwa, Hadramawt and Mahrah in the future under the slogan of (liberating Yemen from the Saudi-Emirati occupation)

The Houthi justifications and slogans are repeated, as they previously expelled the Yemeni Jews and Bohras communities, and opened battles in Sa’ada to as an excuse to expel the Salafis from Dammaj Center in Sa’ada. They also led battles under the slogan of "liberating the tribe" in Amran and battles against “dose” in Sana'a. The justifications of an armed group, whose dream is far beyond the borders of Yemen, are endless, whether it is loser or winner in the battle of Marib. Finally, the Houthis look at any peace initiative as an opportunity to relocate and prepare for a new round of war. So, the sustainable peace is not suitable for the group, because it eliminates opportunities for its expansion, which is apparently an Iranian desire to keep the region in chaos for a long time.

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