

Operation “Dawn of Yemen”

**A New Phase of Attrition or
a Turning Point in the War?**

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Executive Summary

This study examines the circumstances surrounding the Yemeni leadership’s announcement of a large-scale military operation, codenamed “Dawn of Yemen.” It focuses primarily on the operation’s strategic significance in light of recent political and military developments in Yemen and the wider region, particularly following the Houthis’ advances last month and their seizure of the western coast as far as the Bab al-Mandab Strait. The study argues that the operation’s significance extends beyond Yemen to the security of international shipping and global trade through Bab al-Mandab, one of the world’s most important maritime waterway.

Given the circumstances in which it was launched, the operation appears to be an attempt to break the military stalemate that has characterized the war in recent years. It also represents an initiative to shift government forces from a defensive to an offensive posture, enabling them to determine when and where battles take place. Accordingly, the study examines the principal factors surrounding the launch of Operation “Dawn of Yemen” and identifies its political and military objectives.

The study also assesses the Yemeni government’s principal military, political and popular strengths, alongside those of the Houthis, and examines the obstacles that could complicate the achievement of the operation’s objectives. It concludes by outlining several potential scenarios based on developments observed during the operation’s opening days.

Strategic Significance of the Military Operation

At the beginning of October, Rashad al-Alimi, President of Yemen’s Presidential Leadership Council, announced the launch of Operation “Dawn of Yemen,” initiating military action to recapture the remaining territories of the republic under Houthi control and restore state authority and institutions throughout the country. He described the operation as a transition from preparation and readiness to liberation, following the exhaustion of all opportunities for de-escalation.

In his address, al-Alimi stated that the decision to launch military operations had been taken after completing the necessary preparations and procedures, in accordance with decisions of the National Defense Council. He confirmed that the armed forces, security services and all military formations had been instructed to carry out their missions under approved operational plans until the country was liberated from the grip of the “terrorist militia.”¹

The announcement followed two months of escalating Houthi military activity, including advances along the western coast, around the Bab al-Mandab Strait and in several areas of Taiz Governorate. These developments created a new and more dangerous military situation for the strategic maritime passage and international shipping and trade. They also heightened the threat to Taiz city, the governorate’s capital, as the Houthis began tightening their siege from several directions, including the southern approaches, which had remained outside their control for nearly a decade.

Within hours of the operation’s launch, government forces made significant territorial gains near the Bab al-Mandab Strait and recaptured additional areas in southern and western Taiz. Simultaneously, military operations began in Marib and Al-Jawf governorates in the northeast and Hajjah Governorate in the northwest, suggesting a potential shift in the trajectory of the war.

The operation’s importance extends beyond Yemen’s domestic context to regional and international security, primarily because of its connection to the strategic Bab al-Mandab Strait and the western coastline. Its significance also derives from Taiz Governorate, which occupies a strategic position and has a large population opposed to the Houthi project, and from Lahj Governorate, situated between Taiz and Aden, the Yemeni government’s interim capital.

The western coast and Bab al-Mandab have become a focal point of both the Yemeni war and wider regional and international rivalries. Their growing strategic importance to domestic and external parties, as well as other influential political and military actors, prompted the Iran-backed Houthis to develop a comprehensive plan to seize these areas.

This coincided with tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, at the southern end of the Arabian Gulf, and was intended to strengthen Iran’s leverage amid the military confrontation it has been engaged in with the United States since the middle of last year. The Strait of Hormuz has become one of the most prominent flashpoints in that confrontation.

At the domestic level, the strategic importance of Bab al-Mandab and the western coast cannot be separated from that of Taiz and Lahj. Taiz provides a vital connection between the mountainous highlands and the western coastline, while Lahj links the coast and the strait to southern urban centers, particularly Aden.

The fighting that began in early September has therefore unfolded across an interconnected network of strategically important locations and territories.

Circumstances Surrounding the Launch

The announcement of Operation “Dawn of Yemen” could mark a significant turning point if it establishes a transition by the internationally recognized government from defensive to offensive military operations. Such a shift would break the stalemate that has prevailed for years, allowing government forces to move beyond merely responding to Houthi escalation. During this period, the front lines remained largely static, interrupted only by occasional skirmishes.

From this perspective, any meaningful breakthrough in the military deadlock could represent a turning point in a war that began more than a decade ago, particularly as the operation was launched approximately one month after the Houthis seized the western coast, Bab al-Mandab and several districts of Taiz Governorate.

The operation can also be understood as an attempt to change the rules of engagement, deprive the Houthis of their recent gains and force them to confront a new military reality fundamentally different from the one they had established through their territorial advances.

This was particularly evident in the recapture of Dhubab and Bab al-Mandab, the continued resistance in parts of Taiz and Lahj, and the recovery of several important positions that the Houthis had seized the previous month.

Several factors help explain the circumstances surrounding the decision to launch Operation “Dawn of Yemen”:

□ Breaking the military stalemate and shifting to the offensive. Government forces have moved from defensive operations to offensive action across several fronts and governorates, including Marib, Al-Jawf and Al-Bayda.

□ The expanding Houthi threat and the convergence of strategic interests. Houthi control of Bab al-Mandab broadened the threat at domestic, regional and international levels. This, in turn, brought Yemeni strategic calculations into closer alignment with those of regional powers, principally Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as international actors that prioritize the protection of maritime routes and global shipping. Although the Houthis had committed to the Americans not to attack American and Israeli vessels, the White House, which initially appeared somewhat restrained in its response to the Houthi advances, began signaling a possible change in its position, particularly as attacks against Saudi territory, ports and airports intensified. Furthermore, the newly formed “Mecca Alliance,” comprising Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan, approved defensive measures at an emergency meeting in early October following Houthi attacks on Saudi facilities.

□ **Geographical and maritime considerations.** The western coast and Bab al-Mandab are strategically important because they lie along an international trade route connecting three major continents. This makes the western coastline one of the principal strategic keys to the war. Continued Houthi control of the area would enable the group to threaten international trade, disrupt navigation through a critical maritime passage and exploit maritime geography as a source of leverage for Iran against its adversaries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United States.

□ **The failure of previous negotiations.** The Yemeni government’s statement made clear that the military operation was launched after “all opportunities for de-escalation” had been exhausted. This effectively closes the door to attempts to revive a negotiation process from which the Houthis benefited during successive rounds, despite being primarily responsible for obstructing progress. This pattern has persisted since the first and second Geneva talks, through the Kuwait negotiations, the Stockholm Agreement, and talks in Oman and Jordan, among other diplomatic initiatives. The government’s military decision must therefore be understood in the context of a negotiation process that has produced no tangible results, despite the concessions made by the government under pressure during successive rounds of talks.

□ **The external environment.** The latest military decision comes amid circumstances markedly different from those that prevailed in the region in previous years. The regional environment is increasingly volatile because of escalating tensions between Washington and Tehran, while the military escalation in Yemen coincides with worsening security crises in the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea. Consequently, the conflict in Yemen can no longer be treated as separate from the regional and international environment. Yemen has become part of a wider network of conflicts involving maritime corridors and escalating military and security tensions across the region.

Objectives of Operation “Dawn of Yemen”

Government statements, particularly the announcement launching the operation, identify a range of political and military objectives.

According to Yemen’s Minister of Defense, “The operation consists of six phases. We are still in the first phase, and it is proceeding according to clear plans.”² In a televised interview, he also stated that Sana’a would come under government control within the timeframe set by the political leadership.³

The political objectives include restoring state institutions and liberating governorates and territories from Houthi control. The President of the Presidential Leadership Council reaffirmed these objectives, stating that the ultimate goal was to recapture Sana'a and restore state authority throughout Yemen.

Militarily, the operation seeks to dismantle the Houthis' system of control rather than merely recover a limited number of territories while allowing the military deadlock that has characterized recent years to persist.

The operation also has distinct geographical objectives. Yemen's political and military leadership has prioritized several areas as initial points of advance because of their geographical characteristics and political and military significance.

In the first hours following the announcement, government forces moved to recapture Bab al-Mandab and areas along the western coast. Fighting continued in Taiz and Lahj governorates, while clashes resumed in western and southern Marib and eastern Al-Jawf.

Government forces on several other fronts remained in their positions without advancing. According to the Minister of Defense, these fronts would become active as soon as the leadership issued the necessary commands.

Another important set of objectives concerns the Houthi threat to regional security, international trade and maritime routes.

Given the convergence of domestic, regional and international strategic interests, neutralizing Houthi military capabilities used to launch attacks from Yemeni territory against Saudi territory and facilities, and to threaten international shipping, has emerged as a major objective.

This has become particularly important following the escalation of Houthi threats and the increasing frequency of attacks against Saudi Arabia.

Government Forces: Strengths and Constraints

The Yemeni government possesses several military and non-military capabilities that constitute significant advantages in its confrontation with the Houthis. These can be summarized as follows:

□ Regional and international recognition and support. This is a central component of the government's political, diplomatic and military strength. The international community recognizes and engages with the Yemeni government, while regarding the Houthis as a militia affiliated with a rogue and rebellious state. Saudi Arabia, one of the Yemeni government's principal supporters, is mobilizing additional assistance and alliances against the Houthis, particularly as the threat has intensified following missile attacks on airports, ports and other facilities in several Saudi cities. Pakistani and Turkish statements have emphasized support for Saudi Arabia under the trilateral agreement between the three countries. Arab states and several major powers, led by the United States, have also declared their support for Saudi Arabia against the Houthis. Together, these developments strengthen the Yemeni government's position and provide it with political and strategic advantages over the Houthis.

- **Sustained air support.** Air operations have demonstrated their effectiveness in targeting and destroying Houthi military installations, including intelligence facilities, military communications centers and missile launch sites across several governorates, particularly the capital, Sana'a. Airstrikes have also destroyed command-and-control centers and targeted Houthi fortifications and supply routes connecting governorates, districts and battlefronts.
- **Domestic support.** The government and its various military formations benefit from popular support, alongside the presence of local resistance forces in many areas. These groups support government forces and confront the Houthis, providing an important advantage that could influence the balance of power, particularly if military operations expand.
- **Manpower.** Government forces possess substantial manpower distributed among numerous military units and formations across the front lines. The effectiveness of this advantage will depend on adequate training, preparation and equipment, as well as the ability to deploy forces at appropriate times under previously established operational plans, rather than keeping them in defensive positions to repel Houthi attacks.

The Houthis, by contrast, constitute an armed ideological organization whose doctrine rests on a religious foundation and the belief that its leadership possesses a particular entitlement to rule because of its claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad.

The group also possesses several sources of strength that must be recognized, including an ideological commitment that motivates its members to fight tenaciously in pursuit of objectives determined by their leadership.

The Houthis' principal strengths can be summarized as follows:

- **Political and economic structures.** The Houthis should not be viewed simply as armed units engaged in military campaigns. Their military formations represent only the visible dimension of a much broader organization. Behind them lies an administrative structure, extensive security networks and economic systems that have expanded across Houthi-controlled territories in recent years. These structures are monopolized by individuals belonging to the Hashemite lineage.
- **Capacity to wear down opponents.** The Houthis are particularly adept at prolonged warfare in mountainous terrain, where they have extensive combat experience. In such environments, airstrikes are less effective than in coastal areas, plains and open terrain. This complicates military operations and creates conditions in which government forces could become trapped in prolonged battles of attrition without achieving significant territorial gains.

□ **Missiles and drones.** The Houthis have demonstrated a willingness to use these weapons even against civilians in pursuit of military objectives. In recent days, they have launched ballistic missile and drone attacks against civilian facilities, including Aden International Airport. They have also fired several ballistic missiles at civilian populations in the Al-Sabaiha area of Lahj Governorate, Taiz city and surrounding villages, as well as Marib city. These incidents indicate that the Houthis tend to intensify their use of such weapons when they find themselves in difficult military circumstances, face the prospect of defeat or encounter fierce resistance that prevents further territorial advances.

□ **Defensive networks.** The Houthis seek to secure and reinforce their defensive networks to prevent localized defeats from developing into broader military setbacks when their opponents advance. Nevertheless, these defensive systems are sometimes breached following collapses within Houthi ranks caused by battlefield defeats and sustained air and ground fire.

Government forces also face several significant constraints:

□ **Advancing from coastal areas and plains into Yemen's central and western highlands** will make military operations more complex, particularly for formations with limited experience in this type of terrain and combat. The Minister of Defense acknowledged this challenge in one of his televised interviews.

□ **Expanding the war into densely populated areas** will increase both the financial and human costs of the conflict and generate additional humanitarian needs. These burdens will fall on government forces and the government itself, which bears responsibility for the entire population, creating further pressures and obligations.

□ **The diversity of military forces and formations fighting alongside the government** presents another potential challenge. Although they operate under a unified command, a joint operations room and previously agreed objectives, the possibility of disagreements on the battlefield cannot be ruled out. Such disagreements must be taken seriously because any division during combat could give the Houthis a tactical advantage that they might exploit to achieve a breakthrough and alter the outcome of a battle.

Future Scenarios

In light of developments following the Yemeni political leadership’s announcement of Operation “Dawn of Yemen,” several potential scenarios emerge.

1. Gradual Expansion of the Offensive in Favor of Government Forces

Under this scenario, government forces and allied military formations would make further gains along the western coast, enabling them to advance north toward Hodeida and east toward Taiz.

These advances would coincide with comparable victories in Taiz and its southern and western countryside, alongside substantial progress in Marib, Al-Jawf and Al-Bayda.

For this scenario to materialize, government forces would need additional advanced weaponry, sustained air support and cohesion among the various forces participating in the fighting.

Such developments would move the conflict beyond its prolonged stalemate and into a new phase in which the military balance is reshaped by changing realities on the ground.

2. Expansion of the War into the Wider Region

Under this scenario, the Houthis would intensify their missile attacks against Saudi Arabia, pushing Riyadh toward a course of action it has sought to avoid for years.

Saudi Arabia could consequently undertake specialized military operations extending beyond airstrikes to include support for government ground advances along Yemen’s northern border with the kingdom, particularly in the border governorates of Saada and Al-Jawf.

At the same time, Saudi support for government forces and their allies would continue across other fronts.

Although this scenario might initially appear to favor the Houthis, its consequences could ultimately turn against them in subsequent stages.

3. A Prolonged War of Attrition

In this scenario, the Houthis would absorb the initial shock of the offensive, regroup their forces and resume attacks against less heavily fortified fronts and positions.

They would also continue using ballistic missiles against civilian and military targets whenever they encountered setbacks, particularly as sustained air operations continued to target their positions around the clock.

This scenario would remain open to several possible outcomes.

The Houthis might achieve territorial gains that enable them to impose a new military reality. Alternatively, they could suffer successive setbacks that progressively diminish their military strength, particularly if government forces maintain counter-offensives across multiple fronts.

Other scenarios remain possible, including a return to negotiations accepted by both sides. However, there are currently no indications that such an outcome is imminent.

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