

# **The Bride of the Red Sea: A Century of Transformation in Hudaydah**

---



# The Bride of the Red Sea: A Century of Transformation in Hudaydah

---

July 22, 2025

**By:** Tawfeek Al-Ganad

**Cover photo:** Abandoned boats at the fishing port in Hudaydah city on May 6, 2024 // Sana'a Center photo.



The Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies is an independent think-tank that seeks to foster change through knowledge production with a focus on Yemen and the surrounding region. The Center's publications and programs, offered in both Arabic and English, cover political, social, economic and security related developments, aiming to impact policy locally, regionally, and internationally.

---

Hudaydah has long served as a battlefield for those seeking control over Yemen. Since the 15th century, various empires, including the Portuguese, the Mamluks, the Ottomans, and the British, have made both successful and unsuccessful attempts to dominate the region. A century after the Mutawakkalite Kingdom of Yemen, commonly referred to as the Imamate, first extended its authority over the region, Hudaydah continues to hold immense strategic importance.

Since the outbreak of regional conflict after October 7, 2023, Hudaydah has been targeted by airstrikes from the [United States](#), [Britain](#), and [Israel](#), which have destroyed key pillars of its economic power, particularly the ports of Hudaydah, Ras Issa, and Al-Salif. Nevertheless, Hudaydah remains the military and economic center of Yemen's West Coast. Its ports are a vital lifeline for millions inside the country as the principal window for trade and contact with the outside world.<sup>[1]</sup> Iran has [supplied](#) the Houthis through these ports, sending shipments of oil and weapons, and views Hudaydah as its own gateway to the Red Sea. Yet Tehran has failed to deliver a single dose of medicine or shipment of food for the residents of Hudaydah, who continue to die from [disease](#) and [hunger](#). Over the last decade, the Houthis have transformed this once popular tourist destination into a land of fear, rife with armed checkpoints and mines.

This article provides an overview of the key transformations that have shaped Hudaydah over the past century. The city's role in the current conflict and its echoes in the past underscore its enduring role in Yemen's struggles.

## A City of Hunger That Nourishes a Nation

Demographically, Hudaydah is Yemen's second-most populous governorate, home to approximately [three million people](#), approximately 11 percent of Yemen's total population. Its residents trace rich and diverse origins: Arab, African, Indian, and Turkish communities live side by side across an area of roughly 17,145 square kilometers. For decades, Yemenis affectionately referred to Hudaydah as Aroos al-Bahar al-Ahmar: "The Bride of the Red Sea." Since 2022, however, the Houthis have rebranded it to suit their narrative, referring to the city as the "[Guardian of the Red Sea](#)." To cement this shift, they have utilized zamils, popular traditional chants, which glorify Hudaydah as a military stronghold. This change reflects not only an ideological reframing but a practical repurposing of the city, transforming it from a hub of national tourism and economic vitality into a source of maritime power.

Hudaydah is home to some of Yemen's few industrial facilities — including major dairy, beverage, and cement plants — alongside the country's most crucial grain silos. Hudaydah is also [Yemen's leading agricultural](#) center, producing roughly 26 percent of the nation's crops, as well as a substantial share of its livestock and fisheries resources. Economically, Hudaydah's ports — Hudaydah, Ras Issa, and Al-Salif — remain among Yemen's most critical maritime gateways. Through these

[1] Although Aden was historically Yemen's main port, Hudaydah's proximity to densely populated areas in northern Yemen has made it a more convenient hub for traders. Recently, the Houthis have sought to insist on the use of Hudaydah's ports for the delivery of imports, further diminishing Aden's role.

ports, Yemen **imports** approximately 70 percent of its basic goods. Ras Issa served as a crucial node for oil exports and imports from the late 1980s, when pipelines were extended from Marib to the Red Sea. Al-Salif was the principal entry point for large cargo vessels. Hudaydah's ports generated **revenues** of approximately US\$594 million in 2023 alone, forming a core financial artery for Houthi authorities. The Houthis often prevent fishermen from utilizing ports along Hudaydah's coast, given their dual use for arms smuggling and oil imports, leading to significant losses in livelihood.

Yet, despite its resources, Hudaydah consistently ranks high in **malnutrition**. Even before the ongoing conflict, the area suffered from exclusion and marginalization. While Hudaydh's residents have traditionally been known for their peaceful nature, various authorities in Yemen's history have relied on feudal tribal sheikhs to manage local affairs, resulting in the subjugation of citizens to those in power.

Beyond its role as an economic center, the city of Hudaydah serves as an educational and healthcare hub for neighboring areas in Hajjah, Al-Mahwit, Raymah, Taiz, and the Wisab region of Dhamar, and has hosted scholarly communities for centuries. Much of the city's infrastructure was developed in the 1950s and 1960s. The Crown Prince of the Imamate signed **a major arms deal and port development agreement with the Soviet Union** in 1956. This was followed by an agreement with **China** to build the first paved road linking Hudaydah to Sana'a, opened in 1961 — a development that allowed goods to flow directly to the capital, which had previously relied solely on the port of Aden. After the port's inauguration in 1962, the revolution against the Imamate broke out. Just days later, the **first Egyptian ship** arrived to support the Republicans. Hudaydah thus became a vital artery for Sana'a: it was the launch point for the campaign that broke the famous Seven-Day Siege in February 1968 — a turning point victory for the revolutionaries.

## Past and Present Struggles

Between 1911 and 1925, the Hudaydah governorate experienced several conflicts and upheavals, ultimately falling under the sovereignty of the Yemeni state. A century later, Hudaydah is experiencing a period similar to that of a century ago.

### 2011 and 1911

In 2011, Hudaydah's Al-Shaab Park became a focal point for youth sit-ins during the uprising against then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh's regime — part of a wave of popular discontent aimed not only at Saleh, but also at northern elites who controlled the city and were widely accused of **large-scale land grabs**. Despite its renowned social diversity, reflected in neighborhoods and markets named for the origins of its inhabitants — such as the Indian Market, the Turkish Quarter, and the Yemeni Quarter — Hudaydah witnessed violent security crackdowns that entrenched the historical marginalization of its people. This environment gave rise to what is now known as the **Tehama Movement** as a platform to express local grievances.



Following the Houthis' takeover of Hudaydah in 2014, the movement faced severe repression at their hands. Abdelrahman Hajri, who passed away in Cairo in 2015, later assumed the leadership of the movement. In the context of the ongoing conflict, the Tehama Movement came to possess military brigades, known as the Tehama Resistance, led by prominent figures such as Ahmed Ghanem and Murad Sharai. These brigades now operate under the umbrella of the National Resistance on Yemen's West Coast.<sup>[2]</sup>

Exactly a century earlier, in 1911, the city of Hudaydah came **under bombardment from Italian naval** guns as part of Rome's conflict with its Ottoman rulers and its broader ambitions for a commercial foothold in Yemen. These ambitions clashed with the interests of Britain, France, and Turkey.

## 2018 and 1918

In 2014, after seizing the capital of Sana'a, the Houthis rapidly moved to take Hudaydah, underscoring the city's strategic importance. A century prior, during World War I (1914–1918), **British naval forces bombarded Hudaydah's port and eventually captured the city**, ending Ottoman rule in Yemen.

During the current conflict, Hudayah's significance was reinforced during a visit by Houthi leaders to Tehran in early 2015, where they reached an agreement **to expand the port**. The importance of the port was reiterated **in a leaked 2018 video**, which featured a Lebanese adviser briefing Houthi officials on its role in allowing Hezbollah to support the group.

In the initial years of the conflict, the city experienced deep divisions between supporters and opponents of the Houthis, which intensified following their killing of former President Saleh in late 2017. The governorate witnessed widespread repression and arrests, particularly during the 2018 **battle for Hudaydah** and following the Saudi-led coalition's **assassination** of the Houthi political council president, Saleh al-Sammad, in April of that year — an event that led to the **execution of nine local residents** accused of aiding the coalition.

Pro-government forces moved up the coast, capturing large swaths of the city, and approaching the main port. However, international actors, fearing a potential humanitarian catastrophe, pressed for an end to the fighting, resulting in the **Stockholm Agreement** in December 2018. While the agreement did not explicitly hand the city to the Houthis, the halt in fighting and the failure to implement the deal's provisions effectively achieved just that.

---

[2] Interview with a journalist from Hudaydah, July 2025.

## 2021 and 1921

In 2021, pro-government forces abruptly and inexplicably withdrew from the outskirts of Hudaydah in what was officially termed a “**redeployment**.” To this day, those forces remain positioned about 100 kilometers south of the city. According to a Yemeni journalist<sup>[3]</sup> who covered the fighting, the Hudaydah offensive was primarily conceived of as a bargaining tool by the Saudi-led coalition to force the Houthis into peace negotiations. The chosen approach — advancing troops along the city’s southern highway without securing their flanks from Houthi forces to the east — suggested from the outset that any presence in the city would be short-lived.

After seizing control of Hudaydah in 1918, Britain handed it over in 1921 to **Sayyid Mohammed ibn Ali al-Idrisi, the ruler of Sabya** and a rival to the Imam in Sana’a. London may have made this decision to pressure Sana’a into granting economic concessions and recognizing the borders that Britain had agreed upon with the Ottoman Empire in 1914 between North and South Yemen.

## 2025 and 1925

This year has been particularly difficult for Hudaydah. In May 2025, Israel bombed the **Bajil Cement Factory** following Houthi attacks **on Ben Gurion Airport**. This facility was Yemen’s first cement plant, built **with Soviet support** and opened in 1972. For decades, it bolstered the national economy and provided jobs. Israel’s link with Hudaydah goes back decades: in 1972, Yemeni authorities arrested an **Israeli spy**, Baruch Marzahi, in the city. He was carrying a forged Moroccan passport and was later handed over to Egyptian authorities.

During renewed US airstrikes in March 2025, there was a surge in rhetoric about a possible new ground offensive in Hudaydah. Yet this offensive did not materialize, and Washington announced **an end to its air campaign** in May with a ceasefire with the Houthis. Still, local hostility toward the Houthis remains high, and a ready-made **Tehama Resistance** force stands eager to reclaim the region. However, they have never been properly supported or strategically leveraged for future stabilization.

A century prior, the Imam of Sana’a recaptured Hudaydah from Idrisi and Sabyan forces in 1925. This victory came despite fierce local resistance to the Imam’s army, which continued battling the tribes of Tehama, particularly the **Zaraniq**, until 1929. During these clashes, the British supported Ahmed Fateeni, a Zaraniq leader who rejected the Imamate and demanded an independent state. The Imam only subdued Hudaydah’s local partisans after encircling their position by seizing Ghalifqa on the Red Sea coast. The Imam forced Tehama’s residents to **surrender their lands** in exchange for the release of prisoners — a promise he later broke by executing all detainees. This betrayal eased Saudi advances into Tehama during their war with the Imamate in 1934, as the Imam’s forces were poorly armed and locals refused to defend him.

---

[3] Interview with Yemeni journalist embedded with the Giants Brigades during the Battle of Hudaydah, May 2025.

After the revolution in 1962, the Zaraniq **sought to reclaim** the lands that had been confiscated from them. In response, republican Governor Sanan Abu Luhum launched a harsh military campaign in 1967 that violently expelled the Zaraniq and made their lands state property. Many were displaced to the Al-Buraiqa area of Aden, where some families remain today. This partly explains why, during the 2015 Houthi advance, displaced Tehama residents **fled** once again to Al-Buraiqa. Houthi policies — marked by arrests, executions, property seizures, and the planting of mines in residential areas — have only deepened historical grievances.

Kamaran Island was also repeatedly **bombed by the United States** due to its use as a Houthi military base. The island serves as a route for smuggling **Iranian weapons** to the Houthis and has been turned into a closed military zone.

Historically, **the island was occupied by the Persians** in 620 and subsequently fell under the control of the Portuguese, Mamluks, Ottomans, and British from the 16th century onward. Britain captured Kamaran in 1915 and established an airport in 1932 to link it by air to Aden. Although geographically part of northern Yemen — it is visible from the port of Al-Salif north of Hudaydah city — London issued a royal decree in 1949 extending British law to the island, which it managed as a quarantine area until the 1950s. After South Yemen's independence in 1967, Kamaran was handed to the new southern state. In 1972, the island's garrison commander, Abdullah Salem Al-Awsji, surrendered it to North Yemen, remaining there with his troops after Aden branded his act treason.<sup>[4]</sup>

## A City at a Crossroads

Today, Hudaydah exemplifies the intersection of local suffering and international power struggles. Neither the Houthis, who deeply distrust the local population, nor the internationally recognized government, which has failed to protect or serve the people, has the city's and residents' true interests at heart. Meanwhile, the international community's overriding concern remains securing maritime trade routes. Repeated airstrikes have destroyed vital infrastructure, from ports and power plants to factories. The attacks were tactical, executed to protect foreign interests, with little regard for Yemeni lives. Sadly, Hudaydah has transformed from a hub of opportunity for Yemen into a center of contestation and devastation.

---

[4] Interview with a Yemeni military expert who was an eyewitness to the events, May 2025.

**Tawfeek Al-Ganad** has worked as a writer and editor for various Yemeni and Arab news outlets, including Al Joumhoria, Al Masdar, and Assafir. As a researcher Tawfeek has led several studies regarding Yemen's political history and contemporary gender-based issues in education. He holds a bachelor of arts in history from Sana'a University.

This article is part of a series of publications produced by the Sana'a Center and funded by the government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The series explores issues within economic, political, and environmental themes, aiming to inform discussion and policymaking related to Yemen that foster sustainable peace. Any views expressed within should not be construed as representing the Sana'a Center or the Dutch government.



[WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG](http://WWW.SANAACENTER.ORG)