

A VIEW FROM THE GROUND: WILL THE BATTLE FOR MARIB DETERMINE YEMEN'S FATE?



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COVER PHOTO: A Yemeni army soldier on guard at Al-Kasara frontline, western Marib, on March 16, 2021 // Sana'a Center photo by Ali Owidha.



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THE ROAD TO MARIB

Fighting on the outskirts of the city of Marib escalated once again in February as Houthi forces launched a renewed offensive to seize the internationally-recognized government's last stronghold in northern Yemen. I decided to go to Marib in March, to check in on the Sana'a Center team in the governorate and witness for myself what was happening in this critical battle.

I called a friend in Marib and asked him to arrange for a car to pick me up at Seyoun airport, about 500 kilometers to the east in Hadramawt governorate. This was to avoid using transportation services provided by private companies, which have flourished during the conflict and are used by various parties to know who is entering Yemen and where they are going.

I arrived in Seyoun in the early evening and had dinner with the waiting driver. He mostly talked about coronavirus; new cases have resurfaced after a long, dormant period. When I inquired about the road from Seyoun to Marib, and whether the route has changed due to the battles, he assured me there was nothing to worry about. People regularly travel on roads near combat zones, and when the fighting gets too close to these roads, they take longer routes instead. It's an adaptation to the rhythm of war; life is a journey that everyone keeps walking no matter how difficult it becomes.

We left at night for the six-hour journey to Marib. The road was clear and smooth, and we passed many large cargo vehicles going both directions on the central artery that links Yemen's far east with the west. Inspections at military checkpoints seemed ordinary despite the escalation in fighting.

It was the middle of the night when I arrived in the city of Marib, which is under a partial curfew that starts at 9 p.m. The curfew was first imposed due to coronavirus and later kept in place for military and security reasons. Security checkpoints, worried about Houthi sleeper cells infiltrating the city, thoroughly examine travelers' identities.

On the first day in Marib city, everyday life seemed ordinary, with streets full of shoppers, cars and schoolchildren. There was no indication of the fighting on the

outskirts of the city. The next day, a celebration attended by women and children was held in the park near the hotel where I was staying – a fascinating scene that reminds us of people's refusal to allow anyone to deprive them of their right to life, even when death looms on the horizon.

Around midnight on the same day, I heard artillery as well as coalition fighter jets for the first time since arriving in Marib. A friend who is well-informed about battle developments in Marib spoke of fierce fighting in the area of Al-Mashjah, west of the city, and an exchange of artillery fire in Raghwan district, northern Marib. Only the barking of stray dogs interrupted the sound of the distant and frequent artillery explosions. I couldn't help but think: What will happen if the explosions get louder? How do the people I saw earlier in Marib's streets feel when they hear the sounds of war? On this night, the Houthis felt like a monster rising from behind the western mountains of the city to devour its peace.

The entire week in Marib, I witnessed a city bustling with life during the day and consumed by worry at night. Whenever the sound of heavy machine guns was heard from Sahn al-Jin military camp, the largest military base near the city, residents looked toward the sky. The Houthis recently accelerated their use of drones, and it's nearly impossible to tell whether they are armed with bombs or sent for surveillance. The gravest threat, however, is Houthi missiles, which target not only army camps but also residential neighborhoods of the city and camps for displaced persons.

Al-Jufainah camp, the largest displaced persons encampment in the governorate, reflects the brutality of a war that has displaced hundreds of thousands of Yemenis and forced them to flee their homes and seek a new life in Marib. The massive camp branches into neighborhoods and alleys and is constantly growing. The poverty and helplessness that prevails there is yet another stark reflection of Yemen's reality as a whole. According to camp residents, they are receiving fewer food rations from humanitarian organizations. The situation is likely to become more dire, considering the further decline in funding for humanitarian operations in Yemen this year.

Marib's governor Sultan al-Aradah is well-known for his strength and vigor, but his features showed evident tiredness. On the same day he hosted me, a Houthi missile struck an area close to where the governor lives. In July 2019, a missile struck a building next to his house where he usually receives the general public. A source close to the governor said there had been at least six attempts to target

him in recent months. Al-Aradah is the Houthis' most valuable target – they are well-aware of the significance of his leadership and management of the difficult military, political and tribal balance in the governorate. Al-Aradah, for example, heads Marib's security committee, which includes representatives from the main army brigades and units operating in the governorate. His standing as a tribal sheikh as well as his leadership skills and personality traits also help ensure that other tribal leaders feel heard and are kept on side. I couldn't help but look around and anticipate a missile or drone strike while having lunch with the governor and his sons.

On my way back to Seyoun to depart Yemen, I passed by the Safer oil industry compound, which supplies most of Yemen with cooking gas and includes a refinery that produces a small amount of petroleum. Lit with yellow lights, its gas flames burned in the pitch-dark night. It is the grand prize for the Houthis; capturing the facility would supply them with significant resources to feed their war machine.

I left Marib thinking about its residents, who do not know what fate awaits them or how this enduring threat to their lives will end. As Houthi fighters descend from the western mountains heading toward them, carrying death, life continues.

HOUTHİ PREPARATIONS

The armed Houthi movement (*Ansar Allah*) prepared for this battle for months before launching it in February. Its last major offensive in Marib governorate, in September 2020, petered out by the end of October, after which preparations for this renewed offensive began. On the propaganda level, the Houthis pragmatically employed various slogans to suit the different audiences. To mobilize the movement's supporters, the offensive was framed in religious terms, as a battle against hypocrites, and of faith against blasphemy. To the wider public, rhetoric conveying patriotism and a battle to liberate Marib from Saudi occupation is used. Other slogans depicting the battle as one against the Muslim Brotherhood aim to appeal to rivals of the Islah party, which dominates Marib. And, of course, the Houthi movement claims it is fighting Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group (IS), a narrative that attempts to court the international community and present the Houthis as partners in the international war against terrorism.

Mohammed al-Bukhaiti, a Houthi leader with a religious and ideological tone and the governor of Dhamar, which is an important reservoir of fighters for the movement, is one of the most prominent figures disseminating Houthi propaganda. Yemeni social media circulated his remarks that framed the battle in religious terms in which he calls on supporters to participate in *jihad* in Marib with their money and lives – rhetoric comparable to that of Al-Qaeda and IS. The Houthis have used such language before, and it is not particular to the Marib campaign.

Houthi tribal, political and security leaders held intensive meetings with tribal sheikhs – both those who support them and those forced to comply with their rule, in Houthi-controlled areas – to achieve two goals. First, the Houthis sought to mobilize fighters from different governorates and tribes to secure the movement's manpower needs for this battle. Second, the Houthis hoped to use tribal sheikhs to convince counterparts in the government's camp in Marib to adopt a neutral stance. However, these entreaties proved mostly unsuccessful as political, historical and sectarian considerations have largely led Marib's tribes to be against accommodation with the Houthi movement.

Prominent Houthi officials heavily involved in these efforts include Major General Abu Ali al-Hakim, the Houthis' chief of military intelligence who is under UN Security Council sanctions, and Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, a top leader within the movement who heads the Supreme Revolutionary Committee and is a member of the Supreme Political Council. Abu al-Malek Yousef al-Fishi, a political leader in the movement who had been sidelined due to internal disputes, was also summoned to participate in these efforts. Al-Fishi is considered a calm and persuasive communicator. He has had good relations with other political parties, such as the General People's Congress, so the Houthis have sought to use his skills as part of a carrot-and-stick approach to attract and mobilize fighters and supporters.

A THREE-PRONG OFFENSIVE

On February 7, Houthi forces launched simultaneous attacks along three frontlines from the north, south and west of the governorate. In the north, fighting broke out in Al-Yatma, in neighboring Al-Jawf governorate near the Saudi-Yemeni border while clashes in the south centered in Marib's Al-Abdiyah district, which borders Shabwa and Al-Bayda governorates. The main thrust of the offensive was in Sirwah, western Marib, where Houthi forces advanced to Kofal camp, the government's most important military base in the district. From there, the Houthi forces pushed forward to the borders of Al-Zour, the last area separating them from the strategic Al-Balq Mountain, which overlooks Marib city. Crucially, however, the Houthis have not been able to secure the right flank at Kofal camp leading toward Marib city. Government forces are still in control of these heights, from which they have targeted Houthi fighters near Kofal camp, which is currently abandoned, and the area up until the borders with Al-Zour. The Houthis also have failed to seize the strategic Al-Kasara area to the north despite intensified attacks.

Houthi forces have coordinated attacks on multiple fronts to hamper government efforts at reinforcing specific frontlines. It seems, however, that the government's preparations – in terms of the number of troops, arms and defensive fortifications – have so far been sufficient to hold off the Houthi offensive. It has not achieved any major breakthrough besides forcing government fighters to withdraw from Kofal, which remains far from secure. The Houthis' recent and costly advance is thus fragile.

The Houthis also carried out a qualitative operation in which a battalion of elite fighters infiltrated the western Al-Balq Mountain, where the fiercest clashes erupted with government forces. Fighting there proved costly for both sides, with Houthi forces eventually withdrawing to the outskirts of Al-Zour. On the government side, Abdulghani Shaalan, commander of the Special Security Forces, was killed along with a number of aides.

The infiltration of Al-Balq Mountain and the subsequent battle represented a moment of acute danger. The mountain is the closest Houthi forces have advanced toward Marib city, and whoever controls it has a commanding position overlooking the governorate capital and major roads that link the city with Al-

Jubah district and frontlines in the south. Perhaps even more important than these strategic considerations, however, is the fact that a Houthi capture of the heights would deal a major blow to the morale of Marib's citizens and the Yemeni army.

The local community appears to largely support the battle against the Houthis. Marib's tribes have responded to the call for tribal mobilization, and recently sent tribal fighters to reinforce frontlines at Al-Balq and Al-Kasara. The willingness of tribes to mobilize despite Houthi deterrence efforts underscores the key role that the tribes have played in supporting government forces and defending the governorate. The threat posed by this offensive, along with the Houthi incitement and propaganda against Marib, has created a spirit of collective unity against the Houthi forces, even stretching beyond Marib's borders. Military reinforcements and volunteer fighters have flocked to Marib from other areas of Yemen, including battalions from the Giants Brigades and army units from Shabwa, Abyan and Taiz. Islah has also mobilized fighters in Marib and other governorates where the party holds sway such as Taiz and Shabwa. **These reinforcements** appear to have strengthened the defensive situation for the government side.

However, the army still faces challenges. The defensive strategy adopted by government forces has ceded the initiative to the Houthis, allowing them to dictate where and when new attacks will take place. This unknown puts both army forces and local communities under constant pressure. Another serious challenge the army faces is the suspension of the soldiers' wages, which has resulted in a growing number of soldiers who haven't been paid for months leaving military service in search of any job opportunity – including as taxi drivers and day laborers – that can generate an income.

Coalition fighter jets have also played a decisive role in stemming the offensive by targeting Houthi forces on various frontlines. This air support has proven most crucial in open-flat areas such as Al-Kasara frontline, where Houthi forces could quickly advance using armored fighting vehicles were it not for the threat from above. Airstrikes have also targeted the Houthi supply routes and reinforcements moving toward frontlines in western Marib from Sana'a and Al-Jawf.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE BATTLE

As Yemen's war enters its seventh year, the Battle for Marib has become one of the largest battles of the entire conflict, whether in terms of its geographic scope, the number of fighters and military personnel involved, or the unfolding military, political and humanitarian consequences. Its potential to alter the balance between the internationally recognized government and the Houthis is significant, especially coming amid a major shift in the international approach to the Yemen war led by the US under President Joe Biden.

The Houthi offensive in Marib also has put tremendous pressure on the new government. The power-sharing cabinet that was formed based on the Riyadh Agreement already is in financial difficulty. With the economy in shambles, it lacks resources, and Saudi Arabia has not kept its promise to grant new financial support to the Central Bank of Yemen, according to [a January interview with Prime Minister Maeen Abdelmalek Saeed](#). Complications remain toward fully implementing the military and security aspects of the Riyadh Agreement, and fighting in Marib only worsens the fragile political situation of the government.

It's unlikely that the Battle for Marib will deescalate. While certain frontlines may experience fewer clashes, as witnessed during past offensives, this is usually due to resources being directed to specific areas where fighting remains ongoing. Ultimately, further escalation remains the most probable outcome as the Houthis attempt to achieve a breakthrough. The Houthi movement needs tangible results that justify the size of its mobilization, the losses of fighters and the declared goals of the battle to its base. So what will happen if the Houthis win this battle? Will they solidify control of Marib and its resources, and with it their rule in the north?

Losing the government's last northern stronghold would weaken the government, President Abdo Rabbu Mansour Hadi and Islah not only against the Houthis but also in their simmering confrontation with their governing partner, the Southern Transitional Council (STC). Despite the serious military risks posed by a Houthi victory, the STC may consider Marib's fall and full Houthi control over northern Yemen to be the political opening it needs to demand South Yemen's secession.

It also seems likely the Houthis will have further territorial ambitions, given the

military presence is weaker in other areas than the forces assembled to confront them in Marib. Houthi forces could continue to pursue their Islah rivals from Marib into neighboring Shabwa and Hadramawt. Succeeding in Marib could allow them to shift their military resources as well, to confront the Joint Forces on the west coast and focus on regaining control of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. Doing so would further solidify their position along the vital international shipping lane in the Red Sea. The Houthis have real ambitions to control all of Yemen, and these require capturing Marib first.

By rebuffing the new diplomatic push for dialogue to achieve peace, the Houthis are making clear they are betting on a Marib victory to enhance their influence and force the international community to deal with them based on new facts on the ground, including having Marib under its control. For the Houthis, the timing couldn't be better: Saudi Arabia is politically weak on the international level and its allies appear less committed to defending Marib than they were during the 2018 battle for Hudaydah. Then, there was clear and forceful international pressure on Saudi Arabia to halt the fighting, resulting in the Stockholm Agreement. The current tone toward the Houthis appears weak and timid by comparison.

Despite a lack of leverage against the Houthi movement, the international community must take a clear moral stance in this battle; otherwise, it will only reinforce the perception among Yemenis that outside powers are silent in the face of Houthi aggression. Many Yemenis who fled their homes and sought refuge from the Houthis in Marib city face a very real prospect of having to flee again. Fewer and fewer safe havens remain.

If, however, the Houthis lose this battle after their large-scale mobilization and preparations, it would show that Marib cannot be won by force and coercion. Such a loss would deal a blow to their supporters, stunt their political ambitions and curb their ability to bargain; this, in turn, would benefit the renewed international diplomatic momentum for ending the war. The thus-far unyielding Houthi movement may be forced to listen to calls for negotiations if it fails in Marib.

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