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Marib

The Battle that will shift the power balance & the regional alliances map



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Control map over Yemen is constantly changing between the warring forces in the Yemeni arena. Since 2015, when the coalition countries' declared war on Yemen under the "Decisive Storm" operations, the map of control has changed and formed between the coalition forces and their allies, and "Ansar Allah" and their allies.

Between (2015 – 2019), the coalition and its allies were dominant in most of the military confrontations, as they were able to control many lands that were under the Sana'a authority grip, especially in the southern governorates, then the eastern governorates of "Marib" and "Al-Jawf" and progress until they reached «Nehm District» near the capital Sana'a. This was followed by its (Coalition forces) control of Yemen's western coast overlooking the Red Sea in 2018, which extends from Bab al-Mandab strait, all the way to the southern entrance of Hodeidah city.

The military map in the country has witnessed a drastic change since 2019, when the Yemeni army backed by the popular committees announced a large-scale operation against the coalition and the local forces it supports in «Saada» Governorate, which was dubbed «Victory from Allah», during which they were able to capture 3,500 soldiers, and control a large area of the province that was under the Coalition's control, thus eliminating the coalition's threat imposed on Saada Governorate, the first stronghold of "Ansar Allah".

This operation constituted a fundamental change in the cores of the confrontations between the two parties, as it was the beginning of many major military operations carried out by Sana'a forces, through which they were able to change the map of confrontations, and it also marked the end of all major coalition operations, as no major military operation has been carried out since that period until 2021.

The Change in the power balance in favor of Sanaa forces was not the dangerous shift in Yemen. Rather, this was accompanied by a quasi-radical change in the popular mood about the coalition and its promises, which none of them was found in reality. It (The Coalition) has proven political, economic and security failure in all the areas it calls "liberated", as the

massacres committed by the coalition in Yemen have also contributed greatly in changing the popular mood not only in the areas under Sana'a authority, but also in the provinces affiliated with the coalition and the so-called "legitimate government".

For example, after the Arab coalition bombed a civilian car in "Shabwa Governorate" in September 2021, US "Mint press News" website reported in its handling regarding the incident: (An old man from "Shabwa Governorate" said: "Nothing will satisfy us except that Saudi and UAE leave our land»), he said that while standing on the charred remains of a family after they were bombed by coalition warplanes in «Markha» area, which is located in Shabwa, one of the largest governorates of Yemen. Despite the fact that the UN confirmed the incident, the Saudi-led coalition evaded responsibility, saying it had no information about airstrikes targeting civilians in Shabwa. Despite this, the operations sparked anger among the residents of the province towards the Coalition. To top it off the residents of northwest Shabwa - where the bombing occurred - pledged allegiance to "Ansar Allah" and gathered men and arms to expel the coalition forces and their allies from the area. Some members of the Shabwa tribe announced after a mass meeting in «Bayhan» that «brutal attacks cannot frighten us or deter us from liberating our land and standing side by side with the honorable powers in the country» ^[1].

This shift in the popular mood was accompanied by good recruitment and exploitation by Sana'a authority, and mismanagement by the coalition and those on its side from the Yemeni forces. That in turn was the key element in changing the military scene in Yemen. During 2021 alone, Sana'a forces were able to control the entire of "Al-Bayda Governorate" and four districts of "Shabwa Governorate," heading towards "Marib Governorate" and reaching the gates of Ma'rib city, the capital of the governorate, after controlling 12 out of 14 districts.

Controlling all these strategic areas is not an easy thing to move past on, as its repercussions are difficult to contain and its consequences won't be limited to the map of military confrontations between the two parties. But

before talking about the results, repercussions and effects, it is useful to highlight the importance of Al-Bayda and Marib governorates.

Al-Bayda Governorate occupies a very important geographical location, as its borders are shared with eight other governorates: (Shabwa, Al-Dhalea, Abyan, and Lahj from the southern Yemeni governorates, and Marib, Sanaa, Dhamar, and Ibb from the northern governorates). This strategic location gives it a decisive role in the war developments between the Arab coalition and its allies, and the Yemeni army and the popular committees. In addition to this, the authority of Sana'a sees Al-Bayda governorate as a strategic depth and that the failure to control it or at least earn the loyalty of its people represents a real danger to any authority that rolls Sana'a, in addition to the fact that Al-Bayda is the joint of geographical control between Sana'a and the oil areas in Shabwa and Marib, along with the power areas in the south, such as «Abyan» and «Yafa'». Its (Al-Bayda) central regions enjoy a mountainous nature that provide an important protection against any attack on Sanaa from the southern or eastern areas. Al-Bayda armed tribes Also preserved their traditions, and were not affected by waves of alienation towards Europe nor the US ^[2].

The strategy of Sana'a authorities in dealing with Bayda tribes is twofold:

first: Mobilizing its supporters among the tribes, especially those affected by the coalition's operations, and those who see "Decisive Storm" as an aggression against their country.

Second: Neutralizing the tribes that are not loyal to it. This aims to ensure that these tribes are placed in a non-hostile situation and deprives the coalition of their support, and gives Sana'a forces freedom of movement within the governorate and control over it ^[3].

This strategy made an important difference in the military map in Yemen, according to the US researcher «Michael Horton» report - who provides consultants to a number of US and British security and military institutions - he believes that "Ansar Allah" mainly depends on negotiation and

reconciliation with the tribes, as he says: «The Houthi leadership realizes, like any effective government in Yemen, that negotiated settlements are key to winning over tribal allies». Without these tribal alliances, no single group can control North Yemen or Yemen as a whole.

One of the Houthi strategy's main pillars is to win without fighting. However, when negotiations fail, the Houthis rush to launch well-coordinated ground attacks, followed by further attempts to negotiate alliances. The Houthis approach in most parts of Yemen is to offer the carrot, then the stick, then the other carrot, and last the baton. This approach, combined with the Houthis' military acumen, helped make them the most powerful political and military force in Yemen ^[4].

Takfiri «Terrorist» organizations & Bayda Governorate

The first beginnings of «Al-Qaeda» emergence in «Al-Bayda Governorate» go back to mid-2011, when members of the organization killed a number of Yemeni soldiers in the town of «Rada». Sheikh «Tariq al-Dhahab» was accused of being the master mind behind the operation, and in January 2012, the organization returned to the fore again after an attack carried out by «al-Dhahab» and a group of gunmen on «Rada' City» where the ancient Radaa Castle and Al-Amiriya Mosque were seized, and the organization also took control of the Radaa City Security Department and all government facilities, with which all sectors of the army and security were nowhere to be found. As a result, a tribal mediation was formed, and an agreement was arranged between the Yemeni regime (at the time) on one hand and Al-Qaeda on the other, in order to hand over government institutions in exchange for the release of «Tariq al-Dhahab's» brother (Nabil) and «Nasser al-Mudhafari» from the Political Security prisons.

After that agreement, Qaeda elements moved from «Rada» to an area

close to the governorate center, “Al-Bayda City”, specifically in “Mamdoud Village” which belongs to the town of “Al-Zahir” - Al Hamiqan area. After that, the Yemeni regime launched several air raids, in cooperation with the Americans, in the framework of what they called “fight against terrorism”, but those raids were counterproductive, as Qaeda operations expanded in al-Bayda, and the organization began a new stage of revenge, and a large number of officers were assassinated, especially those with ties to the Yemeni intelligence services.

The year 2012 witnessed a noticeable decline in the killings carried out by the organization, following a series of confrontations between government forces and Al-Qaeda, but the government forces were unable to eliminate the organization; forcing the government to negotiate. After a long series of negotiations, the two sides reached several agreements during which al-Qaeda elements were neutralized from major cities and allowed to be present in several areas somewhat far from the centers of major cities.

Al-Qaeda reactivated its movements after that; Expanding its influence and enhancing its spread in Al-Bayda Governorate, taking advantage of the horrible situation Yemen experienced, the absence of the state, and the state of chaos during late 2012 until 2014, when “Ansar Allah” were able to lead the popular correction revolution in September 2014. After the revolution gained major success, the Yemeni parties reached and signed the (Peace and Partnership Agreement).

The war on terrorism in the provinces of Al-Bayda and Marib was one of the “Ansar Allah” conditions in the security annex of the agreement, and this is an indication that fighting Takfiri “Terrorist” organizations was/is a priority for “Ansar Allah” from the beginning. However, they failed to completely subjugate Al-Bayda over the course of 3 years of war there and until today, despite the fact that it was the “black hole” that has consumed fighters on both sides more than any other frontline, especially at the beginning of the war ^[5].

Following the September 21 revolution’s success, «Al-Qaeda» announced what it called «Al-Nafir for Jihad» (a form of a war call) against those

it called «Houthis». According to CNN reports, quoting tribal sources in the southern province of Abyan, a large number of Qaeda elements - including elements of foreign nationality - left the districts of (Lodar, Al-Wathia', Al-Mahfad) towards Al-Bayda governorate “to wage jihad against those who they call the Rawafid,» referring to the Houthi group. Press reports indicated that one of the brigades stationed in «Abyan Governorate» revealed that al-Qaeda had brought in fighters from Somalia and the African Horn through the territorial waters; delivering them to Abyan, and from there to Al-Bayda through a series of mountains linking the two areas. According to residents, “Qaeda elements” have appeared in public in Bayda city, carrying the organization’s flags and chanting jihadist slogans, threatening to confront what they called “Almmad Alrafidhe” or the “rejectionist tide” in refer to the anti-Salafisim ideology ^[6].

Late of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, Yemeni army, backed by fighters from “Ansar Allah”, fought several confrontations with Al-Qaeda, and were able to significantly reduce its influence, but the declaration of war on Yemen by the coalition countries in March 2015 forced Al-Qaeda to rearrange its priorities, according to the requirements of the new situation. Hence, they decided to head to the southern provinces, to become part of the war against “Ansar Allah” not its leader, as they had a key role in Aden and other battles, given that it was the only organized party on the ground, after the military and security institutions collapsed, which facilitated Al-Qaeda control over must major cities in those governorates after Sana’a forces withdrawal ^[7].

Takfiri “Terror” organizations formed a major faction of the Yemeni fighting factions within the coalition ranks, according to what several international reports said, including BBC and AP. After the coalition forces entered Aden in May 2015 and the Yemeni army and popular committees withdrew from most of the southern governorates, Al-Bayda governorate turned into one of the most important battlefields in Yemen, as it represented an important haven for Al-Qaeda during the past years, especially after the terror group abandoned its main strongholds in Abyan

and Shabwa governorates (southeast of Yemen), to avoid confrontations with armed southern formations backed by the UAE.

Although the organization was able before that to penetrate the tribes of Al-Bayda, by attracting some of its sheikhs, such as “Al-Dhahab” in Radaa, the governorate was not as important as Abyan and Shabwa for the group, as it was considered as a “supply line” area more than an incubator. Al-Qaeda did not care much about its loss of the new influence areas in Mukalla, Abyan and Lahj - even if it befalls as a moral loss for the group – and that’s because its practical effects did not exceed its local branches represented by “Ansar Al-Sharia’h” group. However, the existential threat affects the structure of Al-Qaeda, which has remained heavily present in its safe havens, where there are rugged mountains, tribal structure, and an ongoing conflict ^[8].

The central regions (Taiz, Yafa, Al-Bayda, and part of Shabwa) were the ideal choice for the group from the moment of its birth, and now it is returning to it in its transitional phase. Yet, Al-Bayda in particular does not only represent the group’s haven, but also a «safe base» from which it can re-launch actions, as it meets the trilogy of (mountains, tribe, and war). In addition to that, the terror organization’s elements in al-Bayda include tribal and family leaders such as “Al-Dhahab family”, which some of whom were not satisfied with pacifying Al-Qaeda, but also pledged allegiance to the group and rose up its ladder of power to handle leadership positions.

The governorate witnessed cases tides in terms of control between the Takfiri “Terror” organizations and Sana’a forces, and this continued until mid-2021, when Sana’a forces managed to liberate the entire province and expel all terrorist elements from it, after the so-called legitimate government and the coalition declared launching what they called Operation “Golden Arrow” to control Al-Bayda last August. The course of battles eventually turned in favor of Sana’a forces, which declared Al-Bayda a fully liberated governorate last September, less than a month after the battles.

Why controlling Al-Bayda is very important?

- 1- Al-Bayda Governorate enjoys a strategic location, as it is in the middle of the country and is connected to 8 governorates, four in the north (Ma'rib, Dhamar, Ibb, and Sana'a), and four in the south (Abyan, Al Dhale'e, Lahj, and Shabwa).
- 2- Controlling Al-Bayda means securing the four northern governorates that fall under the administration of the Supreme Political Council, including securing Ma'rib governorate from military detour that could be implemented by the "Islah" party fighters and the UAE backed forces led by "Tariq Afash".
- 3- Disabling the geographical dominance of Qaeda and ISIS, which uses the governorate as its most prominent official headquarters in the Arabian Peninsula.
- 4- It's considered a massive setback for both the UK and the USA, which established terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and through them they create a pretext for military intervention in any country.
- 5- An important center and an important gateway to move towards controlling the four occupied southern governorates of: (Shabwa, Abyan, Lahj, and Al-Dhalea), and this will strengthen the position of Sana'a government, "Ansar Allah" in any upcoming negotiations.
- 6- Cutting the military supplies lines coming from Lahj and the coast of Abyan towards Ma'rib, depriving the terrorist groups of "Al-Qaeda and ISIS" from obtaining support and restrict their activities.
- 7- It being the second governorate located in the center and heart of Yemen, and this represents a great impetus for the army and the people's committees to move towards liberating the rest of the occupied governorates, which contain +800 ports, according to several international organizations reports ^[9].

Marib Battle

There is no doubt that winning Ma'rib Battle in favor of Sana'a forces represents a turning point in the Yemeni, regional and international scene in general. And now indications began to emerge of US preparations for a stronger intervention in the battle line, with the aim of stopping the series of successive setbacks received by the outgoing president's forces, «Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi,» which, if continued, would end in a severe blow to the so-called «legitimate government».

In this context, the Lebanese newspaper “Al-Akhbar” reported, from intersecting sources, that “US and Saudi officers met a few days ago, with a number of leaders from the First Military District in Hadi's, army, and leaders from “Islah” Party militias, in “Wadi Hadramout”, where they agreed to mobilize Qaeda members to fight in the south and west of Ma'rib city ^[10].

According to the newspaper, “the US forces present at “Al-Rayyan International Airport” in “Mukalla city”, the center of Hadhramaut governorate, established during the past three months - with Saudi funding - a new runway on the military side of the airport with a length of approximately 350 m, which entered service a week ago by receiving a daily military flight”. Among the US and Saudi military aircraft the runway receives are C-130 aircraft designated for military transport and known for their large payload.

The newspaper pointed out that informed sources revealed, on Saturday, October 23, the arrival of a shipment of various and sophisticated weapons, accompanied by US military personal, to the headquarters of the Coastal Defense Brigade, under the pretext of “securing the northwestern plateau of Hadramout Governorate”. However, the recent US movements on the border with Ma'rib governorate, according to the newspaper sources, came in response to a Saudi appeal to strengthen the support given to it in this battle.

The US interest in the course of Marib battle has recently escalated with the battle reaching a decisive stage. The Americans have already sent field

military experts to Marib, as they see its liberation as a major loss for their interests, not only in Yemen, but in the region. The war on Yemen was announced from Washington, which makes it a pure-American war, where the US provided large and open logistical support to the Saudi aggression, over the past years, according to retired Major General in the Yemeni army, “Khaled Ghorab”.

Repercussions & Results of the military confrontations

We are certain that a major transformation in the war on Yemen is about to happen soon, as the “Sana’a forces” control over Ma’rib and Shabwa, which are rich in oil, men, and history will move the battle to a completely different stage in favor of Sana’a ^[11].

Egyptian strategic expert, Dr. «Ahmed Ezz El-Din,» considered the army liberation of Ma’rib Governorate as the end of all major battles. “Ezz El-Din” points out: «The Yemeni army and the People’s Committees fought a high-level military battle, breaking the defences of Ma’rib, with a tactic closer to an organized carving of those defences from all perpendicular directions, as they also enjoyed a solid fighting will, despite the Saudi and UAE warplane’s spatial bombardment in the absence of anti-air defense systems, and they actually reached (Al-Falaj checkpoint) the entrance of Ma’rib city, after they liberated (Al-Juba) and (Jabal Murad) districts, which are equal to 1100 km²”.

He added: «While the success in actually entering Ma’rib - which I expect to happen within a few days - means the end of all major battles, this would be followed with a progress towards Shabwa governorate after they already took control of 4 districts : (Baihan, Usaylan, Ain and recently Markha), then progress towards Hadramout, and both governorates will be considered in a state of strategic control. Thus, neither the money succeeded in buying what was needed to be bought for mobilization, nor the arms power succeeded in achieving the decisive strategic victory it

thought it was capable of achieving, while the wave of blood rebounded in its natural direction” ^[12].

At about the same time, the voice of the Israeli army spokesman was heard, warning of the accelerated progress in Marib, saying: (Beyond “Marib” is the island and beyond, and so that our (The Jews) tragedy that we suffered 1340 years ago, when Yathrib fell from our hands, Mecca and the island, would not be repeated under your sight) ^[13].

Marib battle inside Yemen war and the region’s balances is almost - according to the Lebanese writer “Nasser Qandil” - similar to «Aleppo» battle in the Syrian war and regional balances. Just as “Aleppo” was the starting point for a stable path in the Syrian war, after which victories rolled in favour of one team, which is the Syrian state backed by its allies, the Battle of Marib is the key to a path after which Yemen’s governorates and cities will roll; It will return to the hands of the army, the committees, and “Ansar Allah”, unless there is a tempting settlement that satisfies “Ansar Allah” and prevents them from continuing to fight battles.

Marib is considered the most important city in Yemen geographically, although it is neither the first nor the second capital, but it is the connecting point and link between the governorates of Yemen in the north and south, and the failure to keep it for “Mansour Hadi’s” side and his government and the Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia, means the impossibility of being able to defend other places in Yemen. At the same time, the success of the army, the committees and “Ansar Allah” in winning this battle means they would get the upper hand in any other battle ^[14].

There is no doubt that the Houthis will take control of Marib Governorate. Such a takeover might happen in six days or six months, but no matter when it happened, it would end the government’s little viability. After six years of war in Yemen, there is little hope that any force inside or outside Yemen will defeat the Houthis militarily ^[15].

Observers, including Arab politicians and academics, believe that “Ansar Allah’s” control of the entire Maṛib Governorate will open the way to confront US military plans in the western coasts near the «Bab al-Mandab

Strait», and in the southern and eastern coasts located on the Arabian Sea, where It (the US) uses the «fight against terrorism» as a pretext to tighten control over international straits and waterways. Therefore, it would not be surprising if Washington throws its weight to prevent or at least delay the restoration of Sana'a forces' control over Marib Governorate, which is strategically important as an oil and gas rich area, and its liberation would push towards breaking the siege imposed on Yemen ^[16].

«International crisis group» : victory is likely for the «Houthis»

In this context, the International Crisis Group said in a report: «The victory of the Houthis in Ma'rib seems more likely after their control of Al-Bayda, and it could be a fatal strike to the legitimate government».

According to the report, the Houthis are running a well-coordinated and constantly evolving military campaigns on several fronts, and in parallel, they are communicating with local tribal leaders in an attempt to negotiate their way to Marib.

Controlling Al-Bayda was the last step towards what could be a final battle to defeat the forces allied with the Saudi-backed legitimacy in Ma'rib city, or at least encircle and isolate it. If the Houthis win this battle, they will become the undisputed military and political force in northern Yemen, which will mark the end of the current phase of the conflict ^[17].

On the other hand, the USA revealed that controlling Marib, by Sana'a forces, will affect regional balances, and that this control will threaten the Saudi depth and will represent a transformation at a regional level.

The “Foreign Policy” confirmed in a report, that the US have an «unfair» conditions in exchange for saving Saudi Arabia from what it called the «Houthi swamp» in Yemen.

The magazine quoted US military experts saying that Ma'rib will constitute a new turning point in the war on Yemen that their country has led for years, and that this turning point does not revolve around the future

situation in Yemen, but also on the Kingdom itself with the possibility of «Houthis» progressing in its depth. The FP sources considered the fall of Ma»rib as the worst-case scenario; yet as an actual victory for «the Houthis» and a turning point in the region.

In conclusion: «Marib battle» will constitute a turning point in the course of the Yemeni crisis, and the eighth year of this crisis will be the year of major transformations, and the re-formation of power balance between the key factors on the ground, such as the Houthis in the north and the Transitional Council in the south, and this context is not new to the historically Yemeni situation. Rather, it can be viewed in general as a cycle of Yemeni history, and it may have different regional measurements, given Iran's and Saudi Arabia's measurements ^[18].

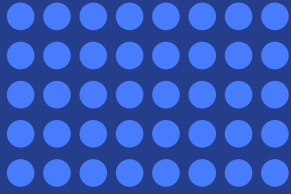
It can be said that the weighting of Iran's side in the equation of this conflict in the short and medium terms; will add more complications to the regional scene, double the negative view of its regional project, and undermine the possible opportunities for its absorption and acceptance at the Arab and international levels. In addition, Iran's cost of expansion abroad can turn at a later stage into a factor of weakness rather than a factor of strength, given the political and economic repercussions of this expansion, especially that it would be constrained by illegality, as well as by restrictions on the Houthi movement as its proxy. As for Saudi Arabia, it has historically dealt politically with the transformations in Yemen as a scene capable of constantly reproducing chaos, but is manageable to adapt with by possible political and defensive means ^[19].

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