

Between Washington and Sana'a

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Yemen has been embroiled in a bloody power struggle since 2014 between its government, supported by Saudi Arabia, and Iran backed Houthi rebels, who control the capital Sana'a and most of the north. The scope and scale of Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen has to be seen in the broader context of the regional conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a battle over regional hegemony that is being waged between Shiite Iran and its allies and a Sunni Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia at a number of friction points across the Middle East including Yemen.

The recent attack on Marib and increased drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia by Iran-backed Houthi forces, has coincided with a fresh push by the United Nations and the United States to end the war.

President Joe Biden, who took office on January 20, 2021, in a major policy shift from the previous Trump administration, decided to remove the Iran backed Houthi rebels from a blacklist of terrorist groups, and also ended US support for Saudi offensive operations in Yemen. But despite the US gestures towards the Houthis, they responded by escalating the violence in the war in Yemen.¹

Saudi Arabia's permanent representative to the United Nations, Abdullah Al-Muallami said the Kingdom will continue to treat the Houthis as a terrorist organization regardless of whether the United States decided to designate the group as such.²

Yemen's government and experts have warned the US administration against supporting a hasty peace settlement that does not include disarming the Houthi group.

The battle over Marib

The Houthis launched an offensive to seize the city of Marib, the capital of oil-rich Marib region, one of the Yemeni government's last strongholds in the north. The Houthi rebels had advanced towards the city on two fronts (north and west) after seizing al-Zor in Sirwah district up to the western sides of Marib dam and tightened their grip on hills overlooking supply lines for several fronts.³ The Houthis have also cut off supply lines to a district about 50 kilometers south of the city, with the goal to lay siege to Marib.⁴

Saudi-led coalition has intensified air strikes to stop the rebels from seizing the city and the Houthi-run Al-Masirah television reported dozens of airstrikes in several areas in Marib. The total toll from the battle for Marib is unknown, but there are reports of hundreds dead.⁵

Amid government calls for residents to defend the city, Houthi spokesman Mohamed Abdelsalam tweeted on February 13, 2021, that the rebels were fighting "only those militarily involved with the foreign enemy" "May the honorable people of Marib be reassured... and acknowledge that the aggressor coalition is fighting them, not for them," he said.⁶

The United States called on the Houthis to halt its assault on Marib. State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement that the "Houthis' assault on Marib is the action of a group not committed to peace or to ending the war afflicting the people of Yemen...The Houthi assault would "only increase the number of internally displaced persons and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis."⁷

The humanitarian crisis

Yemen's conflict has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions, according to international organizations, sparking what the UN calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Until early 2020, Marib had been relatively safe and became a sanctuary for many. The fighting threatens sprawling camps for internally displaced people, many of whom had fled several times before ending up in Marib. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said some 650 families had already been forced to flee, and warned that another shift in the frontlines would lead to further waves of displacement.⁸

UN Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock warned that around two million civilians were at risk due to the Houthi offensive.⁹

The drone and missile campaign against Saudi Arabia

The Houthi rebels have also escalated drone and missile attacks against Saudi Arabia. The Arab Coalition has reported in recent weeks increased drone and missile attacks launched by Houthis in Yemen towards civilian areas in the Kingdom:

On February 17, 2021, the Arab Coalition has intercepted and destroyed a Houthi explosive drone launched toward Khamis Mushait.¹⁰

On February 16, 2021, the Arab Coalition announced it had intercepted and destroyed a drone launched by the Houthis that was heading towards the Abha International Airport in Saudi Arabia.¹¹

Scraps from the drone were scattered around the airport after the coalition intercepted the attack, a spokesperson said. No casualties or injuries were reported in the Abha attack.

On February 15, 2021, the Arab Coalition intercepted and destroyed an explosive-laden drone fired by Houthis towards Saudi Arabia.¹²

On February 14, 2021, the Arab Coalition said it destroyed two missiles fired into Saudi Arabia in an attack the Houthis said hit Abha airport in the Kingdom's South.

On February 14, 2021, the Arab coalition intercepted and destroyed two drones launched by the Houthis toward Khamis Mushait in southern Saudi Arabia.¹³

On February 13, 2021, Saudi Arabia said it foiled a Houthi drone attack against Abha airport in southwestern Saudi Arabia.¹⁴

On February 12, 2021, the Arab Coalition said it has intercepted and destroyed a ballistic missile fired by the Iran-backed Houthi militia targeting Khamis Mushait in Saudi Arabia. Hours later, the coalition said it had intercepted a second attack of an explosives-laden drone launched by the Houthis.¹⁵

On February 10, 2021, the Arab coalition said a Houthi armed drone targeted Abha international airport, and a plane which was on the ground at the time caught on fire. Yemen's Houthi militia claimed the attack.

"The UAV air force targeted the airfields of warplanes at Abha International Airport - which is used for military purposes to target the Yemeni people - with four drones," Yahya Sarie," Houthi military spokesman said in a tweet. "The strike was accurate, thanks to God."¹⁶

The US State Department condemned the attack carried out by the Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen on Saudi Arabia's Abha airport. The State Department spokesman said, urging the Houthis to halt "aggressive acts."¹⁷

On February 7, 2021, Saudi-led alliance in Yemen said that they had intercepted an armed drone launched from Yemen by the Houthis.¹⁸

On January 30, 2021, the Arab Coalition confirmed it has intercepted and destroyed a drone in Yemeni airspace launched by the Houthi militia targeting Saudi Arabia.¹⁹

The shift in US policy

President Joe Biden, who took office on January 20, 2021, has quickly moved to reverse US policy, aiming to intensify diplomacy to end Yemen's civil war. The new US administration has so far taken four key steps:

- President Biden reversed order issued by former President Donald Trump, just before leaving office on January 20, 2021, to designate the Houthi rebels a terror organization. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced lifting the terrorist group designation but he said sanctions on individual Houthi leaders would remain in place. "The United States remains clear-eyed about Ansarullah's malign actions and aggression," Blinken said, referring to the Houthi movement by its formal name.
- President Biden announced ending US support for the offensive operations of the Saudi led Arab Coalition which intervened in Yemen 2015. But the Biden administration stressed its support for the defense of the kingdom amid a wave of Iran-backed Houthi rebel attacks.²⁰
- The US temporarily froze arms sales to Saudi Arabia while Washington carried out a review.
- The US president has appointed an envoy for Yemen in his efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict.²¹ The US envoy to Yemen, Tim Lenderking, met Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan to discuss developments in the Yemen conflict. They discussed joint efforts to reach a comprehensive political solution to the conflict. The Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Muhammad Al Jaber, also attended the meeting.²²

Summary

The Houthi attack on Marib and the missile and drone terror campaign against Saudi Arabia serve not only the interests of the Houthis in the war in Yemen but are part of an Iranian strategy.

The use of violence to achieve strategic goals has been the modus operandi of the Islamic Republic of Iran since its birth in 1979. The Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy had crippled the Islamic regime and the Iranian economy. Now Tehran tries to put pressure on the Biden administration to lift the sanctions as soon as possible. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted on February 19, 2021, that Iran would "immediately reverse" its retaliatory measures if the US "unconditionally & effectively" lifts "all sanctions imposed, re-imposed or re-labelled by Trump".²³

Despite nearly six years of Saudi Arabia-led coalition's military operations, the Houthis remain in control of the Yemeni capital Sana'a and much of the north. The Houthis are seeking to take control of Marib as leverage before entering into any negotiations with

the internationally recognized government. If the city falls into rebel hands, the Houthis will have full control of north Yemen, weakening the government's negotiating position. Houthi political commander Mohamed Ali al-Houthi warned that "a solution won't happen without a genuine dialogue with Sana'a."²⁴

The political conditions could not be better than they are right now for the Houthis and the rebels are benefitted from the new American policy and the political momentum against Saudi Arabia especially after the US halted support for Riyadh's offensive operations in Yemen.²⁵

Saudi Arabia and other US allies in the Middle East are struggling to contain Iranian hegemonial aspirations, that pose a threat to the entire region. The Biden administration should support it's allies and has to assure that the outcome of a political process to end the war in Yemen will not be interpreted as Houthi and Iranian triumph.

Notes:

¹ UN 'alarmed' at military escalation in Yemen's Marib, Al Jazeera, February 16, 2021.

² Arab Coalition intercepts explosive-laden drone fired by Houthis toward Saudi Arabia, Al Arabiya, February 15, 2021.

³ UN 'alarmed' at military escalation in Yemen's Marib, Al Jazeera, February 16, 2021.

⁴ Dozens killed in overnight clashes in northern Yemen: govt sources, the ne Arab, February 15, 2021.

⁵ Arab Coalition destroys another Houthi explosive drone targeting Khamis Mushait, Al Arabiya, February 17, 2021.

⁶ Dozens killed in overnight clashes in northern Yemen: govt sources, the ne Arab, February 15, 2021.

⁷ US urges Iran-backed Houthis to halt 'assault' on Yemen's Marib, Al Arabiya, February 16, 2021.

⁸ UN warns battle for Marib threatens millions of Yemenis, Ahram online, February 16, 2021.

⁹ UN 'alarmed' at military escalation in Yemen's Marib, Al Jazeera, February 16, 2021.

¹⁰ Arab Coalition destroys another Houthi explosive drone targeting Khamis Mushait, Al Arabiya, February 17, 2021.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Arab Coalition intercepts explosive-laden drone fired by Houthis toward Saudi Arabia, Al Arabiya, February 15, 2021.

¹³ Coalition destroys two Houthi drones fired at southern Saudi Arabia, Arab news, February 14, 2021.

¹⁴ Saudi Arabia says it foiled Houthi drone attack on Abha airport, Al Jazeera, February 13, 2021.

¹⁵ Arab Coalition intercepts Houthi ballistic missile, 2 drones targeting Saudi Arabia, Al Arabiya, February 12, 2021`.

¹⁶ Joanne Serrieh, Iran-backed Houthis claim attack on Saudi Arabia's Abha airport, Al Arabiya, February 10, 2021.

¹⁷ US Condemns Houthi Attack on Saudi Arabia's Abha Airport, Asharq al Awsat, February 10, 2021.

¹⁸ Saudi Arabia intercepts armed drone from Yemen, dw, February 7, 2021.

¹⁹ Arab Coalition intercepts, destroys Houthi drone targeting Saudi Arabia, Al Arabiya, January 30, 2021.

²⁰ US Yemen envoy meets Saudi foreign minister in first visit, the national, February 10, 2021.

²¹ UN 'alarmed' at military escalation in Yemen's Marib, Al Jazeera, February 16, 2021.

²² US Yemen envoy meets Saudi foreign minister in first visit, the national, February 10, 2021.

²³ Iran renews call to US to lift all sanctions imposed by Trump, Ahram online, February 19, 2021.

²⁴ US urges Iran-backed Houthis to halt 'assault' on Yemen's Marib, Al Arabiya, February 16, 2021.

²⁵ UN warns battle for Marib threatens millions of Yemenis, Ahram online, February 16, 2021.