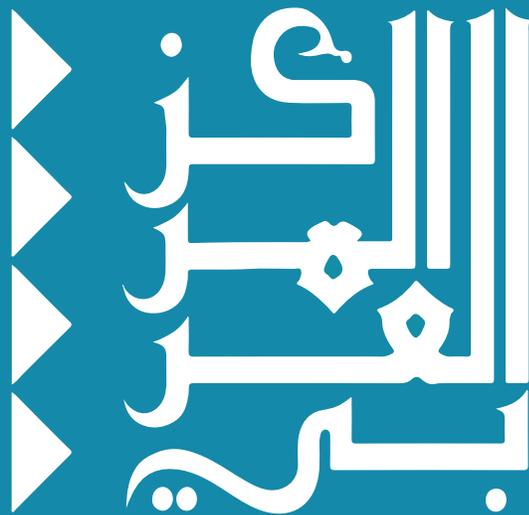


# Deterring Iran in Yemen: Will the United States Join the Hodeida Operation?

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The White House's National Security Council (NSC) is expected to make an imminent determination on whether to provide the Pentagon with a blank check to directly support the Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition's plan to capture the strategic Red Sea Hodeida seaport from the Iranian-backed "Ansar Allah" (led by the Houthis). Such US involvement, even if limited, means Yemen might become the first country under President Donald Trump's Administration where Washington actively deters Tehran's regional influence. In recent weeks, the Arab coalition has been closing in on the Houthis along Yemen's western coast and waiting for the green light from Washington to cut their last seaport connection with the outside world. The looming US decision, when it is made, will have repercussions beyond Yemen, as it could potentially shape a new US policy across the Middle East.

### **The Significance of Hodeida**

The most significant tactical adjustment in the Saudi-led campaign has been the recent shift of operations to the western coast with the objective of capturing Hodeida, the country's fourth largest city. In the past two years of the war in Yemen, the city became a contentious area. Saudi Arabia sought to forcefully close its seaport by asserting that it became a hub for smuggling weapons and generating cash for the Houthis. In response, the international community's outcry last year prevented closing the port that had ultimately become the only route to provide food and fuel supplies as well as humanitarian aid to Yemenis in Houthi-held areas. President Barack Obama's Administration sided with the international community on that debate, which restrained the Saudi-led coalition from further bombing or advancing toward Hodeida. Recently though, with the Trump Administration coming to

power, there have been expectations that the United States might now be more tolerant of the idea of clamping down on the city's seaport.

Riyadh has been escalating the rhetoric in the past weeks, describing (AR) the status quo at Hodeida's port as "unacceptable" and the talks about famine in Yemen as "overblown." Saudi officials also described the Red Sea port as a point of "human trafficking" and a major source of "money and weapons" for the Houthis. From Djibouti, the United Nations as well as the coalition's navy forces currently monitor ships that travel through the Bab al-Mandab strait heading toward Hodeida port; however, Riyadh argues that other ships are out of reach. Recently, the Saudi-led coalition launched airstrikes and destroyed five cranes, which forced ships to wait offshore for their turn to dock. Saudi Arabia has given an ultimatum to the international community: have UN inspectors on the ground, or expect the coalition to take control of Hodeida by force. The United Nations ruled out any interest in running the seaport.

In February 2017, Yemeni government forces, backed by the coalition, captured the nearby Red Sea city of al-Mokha, bringing them closer to Hodeida. According to the United Nations, the coalition "targeted and trapped" civilians during the al-Mokha battle and is expected to replicate that model in Hodeida. The UN also spoke about an "alarming frequency" of possible war crimes in al-Mokha, with aggressive coalition airstrikes targeting civilians as well as Houthi gunmen deliberately hitting civilians "attempting to flee their homes." When and if the ground battle moves to Hodeida, the civilian death toll could increase in a densely populated area where tribes continue to pledge allegiance to former President Ali Abdallah Saleh. Despite their

differences, both Houthis and Saleh loyalists will fight back fiercely, knowing that it might be the most decisive battle in the two-year Yemeni war.

The coalition military plan, led by the United Arab Emirates, consists of two Yemeni brigades, recently trained by Saudi Arabia, which are approaching the city and waiting for a green light to begin the attack on Hodeida. The campaign is expected to be waged on three fronts: 1) from the Saudi border northwest of Yemen via the Midi District in the Hajjah Governorate; 2) from the southwest via al-Khukha city where major confrontations will likely take place; and 3) from the Red Sea where naval landings and gunfire support are expected, especially from Kamaran Island.

Indeed, one cannot underestimate what is at stake in this battle and the role of Hodeida's seaport as a lifeline for the survival of the capital Sanaa, just 226 kilometers away. The seaport also provides crucial access to strategic Yemeni islands in the Red Sea as well as to Bab al-Mandab, and it is the Houthis' last water gateway. Controlling Hodeida brings the coalition one step closer to marching toward Sanaa.

### **The United States and Saudi Arabia: Agreement on Iranian Threat, Differences on Assessment**

On the eve of Donald Trump's inauguration, Iranian foreign minister Jawad Zarif offered to cooperate with Saudi Arabia on Yemen. However, as Trump was signaling a tough stance on Iran, both Riyadh and Tehran began to prepare for a potential confrontation. A Saudi official announced in March that the Iranian-made Kornet antitank weapon is now found in the battlefield, while UAE forces recovered

Qasef-1 drones that are similar to the Iranian drone Ababil-T.

Furthermore, the US assessment in recent months was that the smuggling of Iranian weapons to the Houthis was not going through Hodeida. Indeed, the bulk of Iranian arms deliveries to the Houthis, including anti-ship missiles and explosives, was reportedly going through the Yemen-Oman border. Last October Washington conveyed its concerns to the Omani government, which had been a key interlocutor in mediating the Iran nuclear deal and the Yemeni conflict; however, Muscat denied that there was any weapons smuggling across its border.

The US assessment of the supply route to the Houthis has recently changed once again; now officials believe the shipments are arriving via Somalia. Iran's efforts reportedly bypass coalition interception by transferring cargo in small fishing boats near the seaport of al-Mukalla, the capital of the southern governorate of Hadramawt. That seaport, on the Gulf of Aden and the shores of the Arabian Sea, is under the loose control of the coalition and Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi's forces. The coalition acknowledged facing difficulties in policing the 2,700 kilometers of coastline around Yemen. Trump Administration officials became more vocal about Iranian support to Houthis but did not make these claims beyond any doubt: "There is no plausible explanation for these weapons' appearance other than outside assistance. We assess that assistance has likely come from Iran," a US official said in March.

### **US Options to Intervene in Yemen**

Since the Trump Administration took office, there have been some notable changes in US

policy on Yemen. First, airstrikes and operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) have increased in intensity. Between February 28 and April 2 only, the Pentagon carried out 70 strikes in south Yemen, mainly in Abyan, al-Bayda, and Shabwah Governorates. Second, the United States began to expand cooperation with the UAE and the Hadi government, which gave the latter unprecedented US recognition.

Third, the Trump Administration has been more tolerant of the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen: in addition to muting criticism about the death toll among civilians and the ongoing humanitarian impact, in March the State Department approved the sale of nearly \$390 million in precision-guided missiles to Saudi Arabia, a deal that had been halted by the Obama Administration last December. The White House has yet to announce the arms sale officially, and it will likely face resistance in Congress. Fourth, while there have been no public statements on the record, the Trump Administration seems keen to find a way to have a role in Yemen that would strengthen US ties with Saudi Arabia while providing the easiest battleground to counter Iranian influence.

To that effect, Defense Secretary James Mattis sent a memo last month to White House National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster asking to lift the Obama era restrictions on the Pentagon to provide support to the UAE-led operation in Hodeida port. If that request is approved, it will signal direct US involvement in the Yemeni war instead of merely focusing on AQAP. While there is no expectation to deploy US forces on the ground, Mattis is requesting permission to provide surveillance and intelligence on the Houthis as well as operational planning assistance without asking

for case-by-case approval from the White House. The same Emirati request was denied by the Obama Administration last year.

Indeed, the new administration is setting a new tone with its allies. A US Defense Department official noted that “we’re interested in building the capacity of the Saudis” to operate in Yemen, while a Saudi official expected that Washington will “increase cooperation” with Riyadh on intelligence sharing, equipment, and training. However, the White House is still wrestling with what kind of US intervention to put forward. A senior US official said in March that the Trump Administration is “looking for ways to blunt Iranian malign influence in the region. And we’ll be looking for all the tools that the US government has. In that context, I think you have to look at Yemen.”

It is worth noting, however, that the US views on Houthis had already shifted under the Obama Administration. Last October, “limited and proportional” US tomahawk strikes were launched at three coastal radar sites in areas controlled by the Houthis as retaliation for attempted attacks on a US navy destroyer, the USS Mason, north of Bab al-Mandab. While the Houthis denied attacking the Mason, they claimed responsibility for intending to target a high-speed vessel operated by the UAE. US officials have stated that either Houthis or forces aligned with them were behind the attempted attacks and blamed Iran without escalating tensions between both countries. A Saudi frigate was also attacked last January near Hodeida seaport, and two sailors on board were killed.

There are four US policy options in Yemen facing the NSC: intervene fully, intervene partially, stay neutral, or make no decision. However, if a decision needs to be made, it will likely be a limited intervention that takes into

account the Pentagon's readiness to become involved and the State Department's cautious approach. Pentagon officials are reportedly easing the State Department's concerns by arguing that the operation to retake Hodeida will take around "four to six weeks"—a timetable that, in reality, is unlikely.

Beyond that, the Trump Administration can take specific measures:

- Facilitate stalled arms and ammunitions shipments to the Saudi government. The question is whether the White House would allow the sale only of precision-guided missiles, or of the controversial cluster bombs as well. So far, cluster bombs are off the table; if Washington agreed to selling them and civilians were later killed by them, the Trump Administration would likely face mounting criticism at home and abroad.
- Use drones to gather intelligence on Houthi targets, which means directly deploying unmanned aerial vehicles in the civil war without launching strikes. That measure might encourage Houthis to attack US targets and amplify the talk about US-Saudi complicity in Yemen.
- Provide support in the planning and/or execution of the Hodeida operation to deny Houthis their major seaport link.
- Place US naval ships in combat mode in the Red Sea and strike Houthi targets if they threaten international navigation.

A limited US intervention has its drawbacks and lasting impact on Yemen, including the prolongation of the civil war and humanitarian suffering of the Yemeni population. It can also distract from the US focus on the fight against AQAP, as chaos will lead to instability and a power vacuum. Deterring Iran in Yemen might have a backlash on US interests in Iraq by

complicating the fight against the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria. The Trump Administration's rhetoric on Iran has been contained in recent weeks. If US support to Saudi operations in Yemen is not subtle, Iranian retaliation might be expected and will most likely be proportional to the measures taken by the United States.

### **Should Hodeida Matter to US National Security?**

The single most crucial challenge for capturing Hodeida is not the military campaign itself but the effectiveness of forces loyal to President Hadi in consolidating control of the city. Previous experiences have been questionable. AQAP is still present in the southern governorates' rural areas despite operations in 2016 to liberate these districts. On the other hand, the de facto capital of Aden is witnessing clashes between Hadi forces and the southern separatist movement (known as al-Hirak). Furthermore, the prevailing assessment in the Pentagon is that Saudi Arabia can potentially deal a blow to the Houthis but cannot win the Yemen war in the long term. All these factors are raising questions in Washington: 1) What will the United States gain and lose from that limited intervention? 2) Does Hodeida port pose a direct threat to US national security? 3) What should be done about Iran in Yemen?

The Saudis seem in no rush for the White House to act; there is a belief in Riyadh that besieging the Houthis will eventually yield results that include crippling the economy in Sanaa, causing a rift between Saleh and the Houthis, and/or promoting public anger against Ansar Allah. It is not clear if the Houthis will go to the negotiating table once they lose Hodeida. Further, the Saudi deal of giving the Houthis a stake in the Yemeni system in return for

disengaging from Iran seems off the table for now. Continuing to enforce a full political, security, and economic embargo on the Houthis without offering them a way out will completely throw them in the arms of Iran. Until now, the Houthis' relationship with Iran remains transactional. Washington must encourage Riyadh to use the carrot and stick approach with the Houthis, and to keep the Omani channel open when the time comes for a cease-fire or an opportunity arises to resume talks.

Washington and Riyadh have different assessments of events in Yemen, which will likely keep their cooperation limited. On the one hand, the United States sees the primary Houthi threat in Hodeida in their ability to launch Iranian-made missiles that might threaten freedom of navigation across Bab al-Mandab while identifying al-Mukalla port as the focal point of Iranian attempts to smuggle weapons. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia's highest priority is to impose a full maritime ban

on the Houthis, one that will compel them to come back to the negotiating table and compromise.

There are indications that the intensity of the Yemen war, the sophistication of the weapons used, and the level of Saudi-Iranian tension are all increasing in Yemen. The question is whether it is wise for the White House to turn Yemen into Trump's war. In its last few months in office, the Obama Administration simultaneously launched airstrikes on Houthi targets and halted its arms deal with Saudi Arabia, keeping a distance from both sides of the conflict. Indeed, the Obama Administration did not make up its mind on Yemen. What will the Trump Administration do? The statement of US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis on April 18 offers an early clue: during his trip to Riyadh, he will suggest ways to reactivate the UN-brokered political solution in Yemen. This may mean that the White House is not ready to get fully entangled in the current war.

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