

## **YEMEN: THE BATTLE FOR AL-HUDAYDAH AS A TURNING POINT IN THE CIVIL WAR**

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On June 13, 2018, **pro-Hadi government forces with the backing of the Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates entered the city port of Al-Hudaydah in an effort to dislodge Houthi forces.** Due to the risk of a humanitarian crisis, the United Nations has attempted to secure an agreement with the Houthis to place the port under UN control, but has been unsuccessful.

Al-Hudaydah is Yemen's main city on the Red Sea and, with a population of 600,000, the fourth-largest city in Yemen. **It has been under the control of the Houthis since 2014** but the Gulf coalition has imposed a blockade on the city since 2017. The Hudaydah campaign has been in planning since at least 2016 and, by some accounts, since the Saudi-led coalition entered Yemen's war.

The alliance led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates launched **the «Golden Victory» offensive on June 13** on the heavily defended Red Sea city in the largest battle of the 3-year war. The operation was launched following the expiration of an ultimatum on June 12 at midnight calling for the peaceful withdrawal of Houthis from the port.

The recent battle for the control of Al-Hudaydah **marks a turning point in the Yemeni conflict**, as the city's seaport is the gateway for approximately 80 percent of essential food, medical and commercial supplies for Yemen. **The coalition accuses the Shiite rebels to use Al-Hudaydah as an entry point for Iran-manufactured missiles**, aiming to cut the supply line to limit the weapon capacity of the Houthis, which would give the coalition forces a significant advantage.

The government of President Hadi hailed the operation, announcing it will "secure marine shipping in Bab al-Mandab strait and the start of the fall of the Houthi militia" that has "hijacked the country to serve foreign agendas". Yemeni military spokesman Abdullah al-Shuabi confirmed that several military sites located near the city's southern entrance had been seized by coalition forces in the first hours of the operation. **According to a senior Chatham House consultant, the Saudi-led coalition has up to 25,000 fighters**, in addition to fighter jets and Apache heli-

copters, involved in the operation. The Houthis have no more than 10,000 mostly inexperienced fighters around Hodeidah.

**Still, the clashes on Al-Hudaydah raise severe concerns of a humanitarian crisis as the UN fears scores of civilian casualties amid violent combats.** Yemen, the poorest country in the Middle East, is already suffering “the worst cholera outbreak in modern history” due to the lack of sanitation and clean water.

Amnesty International has warned that violating international humanitarian law in Al-Hudaydah “would put thousands of lives at risk and must be avoided at all costs”. A protracted conflict in Al-Hudaydah risks escalating the humanitarian crisis which has already left 8.4 million people on the verge of starvation, 22 million dependent on aid, and some 2,300 cases of cholera-related deaths since 2017.

**Most of the recent clashes were concentrated around Al-Hudaydah airport area, as the Saudi-led coalition claimed it gained its control on June 21.** However, Houthi rebels claim they have since then recaptured the site following a “strategic retreat”. **Local military and aid sources told Reuters that neither side has complete control of the airport and its surrounding area,** which spreads over 20 km. Coalition spokesman Colonel Turki al-Malki reiterated that the airport was under the control of the alliance although Houthi fighters continued to launch "indirect fire" from surrounding areas into the airport.

**As of June 26, 429 deaths have been recorded since the beginning of the battle;** civilian casualties have not been specified, but thousands have left the combat zones since the beginning of the fighting.

**Hudaydah’s fall into the coalition’s hand could mark a tactical turning point in the Yemeni conflict, and eventually curve the way for a coalition’s victory.** However, the advance on the ground of coalition forces has been **limited** and is far from the expected rapid action hoped for by its leaders.

**On July 1st, forces supporting the Yemeni government of President Hadi announced a pause in their offensive on the port of Al-Hudaydah.** The United Arab Emirates Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash declared on his Twitter account that the Saudi-led coalition had temporarily halted its military offensive on Al-Hudaydah port. He welcomed the efforts of Martin Griffiths U.N., special envoy, who has been attempting to negotiate with Houthi rebels their withdrawal from the port city in order to prevent a further humanitarian crisis. Moreover, **the Houthis affirmed that they wanted to negotiate with the coalition a cessation of hostilities only with the mediation of the UN, and made demands (a sharing of power and guarantees), which the coalition refused.**

The offensive pause announced by Minister Gargash eventually benefits the coalition in preventing a further apparent slowdown of their forces, keeping up appearances for the coalition and its allies, and rejecting possible claims of difficulties on the ground.

In addition, **this pause in combat could serve as a way for the Saudi-led coalition to gather its forces to prepare for a further offensive,** and eventually,

consider new tactics in order to repel a Houthi rebellion that is resolved to stand its ground.

**It also provides Houthi rebels with one more opt-out opportunity**, in a possible last option to avoid an open confrontation for the control of Al-Hudaydah, which is already feared to cause a major humanitarian crisis.

The Houthis denounced the coalition's daily air raids on Al-Hudaydah, explaining that these raids cause civilian deaths; **however, one might assume that the coalition is increasing air raids in the hope of weakening the Houthis and forcing them to negotiate.**

**The loss of the port would be a major blow to the Houthis**, both in terms of loss of a geostrategic city and loss of port income. Though the coalition has taken an audacious initiative with the « Golden Victory » offensive which could give it the upper hand on the conflict, the Houthis oppose and form a fierce resistance to the capture of Al-Hudaydah.

**Al-Hudaydah port is one of the key fronts in the 3-year Yemeni civil war and its seizure may become a turning point in the development of the conflict** – but so far a prolonged fight could only worsen the country's dire humanitarian crisis and lead to a long, violent and uncertain siege.

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