

Houthi Use US Counter-terrorism Weapons against Marib



Situation Assessment

Political Analysis Unit

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Introduction

While international condemnations of the Houthis' attacks on Marib increasing, the Iranian-backed group insists on the military option to reach the government's most important province, which is rich in gas and oil, in an attempt to impose a new military reality that supports its position in negotiations with the Yemeni government and its ally, Saudi Arabia, which also opened two dialogue windows. The first one is with the Houthis in Muscat, and the second one is with Iranians in Baghdad. In addition, any military achievement by the Houthis in Marib will also harm Riyadh, an important ally of Washington in the region, so this will support Tehran's position in its negotiations with the Americans in Vienna.

On May 20, the US State Department announced punitive measures against two Houthi military leaders for what it described as "a brutal attack against Marib, which endangers more than a million displaced people and exacerbates the humanitarian crisis," in addition to the continuing attacks against Saudi Arabia.^[1]

Since their control of the capital, Sana'a, after the coup of September 21, 2014, supported by the regime of the former president, the Houthis have been planning to take control of Marib to control strong tribes and the resource of energy wealth (oil, gas and the power station) and to impose their conditions in any peace agreement. But after the intervention of the Saudi-led Arab Coalition in Yemen in March 2015, the importance of Marib to the Houthis and their Iranian allies increased, as it became a political and military anchor for their opponents, the legitimate government and the coalition.

Therefore, the Houthis believe that the Marib battle may establish a new influence for the so-called "axis of resistance" on borders with Saudi Arabia, with their claim that after Marib negotiations will begin to end the war, a claim that was repeated in Dammaj in Saada, Amran and Sana'a. The lack of the Houthis' credibility appeared in such assumptions. After each Houthi expansion, new more intertwined and complex wars were erupted.

The international community also considers that the Houthis' success in controlling Marib will lead to humanitarian crises and multiple wars, and will open the Houthis appetite to return to the south and move east to complete their control all over Yemen. Such achievement will make it easier for Houthis to obtain money, soldiers and weapons as they are the remaining armed force in the arena that possess the capabilities of a state. This is what the Houthis realize and strive to achieve with all capabilities. In their recent battles in Marib, the Houthis were forced to summon modern and advanced weapons previously belonged to the (Yemeni elite forces). They completely took over those weapons after they killed their partner in the coup, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in December 2017.

Iran's Penetration of Qualitative Military Organs:

When the Yemeni youth launched their peaceful revolution in 2011 calling for the overthrow of President Saleh's regime, Saleh and his followers developed a strategy for rapprochement with the Houthi group, and through that alliance the group was able to penetrate into the depth of Saleh's qualitative military force that he built during his rule for decades, including the Republican Guard forces, Special Forces, Counter-terrorism Forces, the Central Security, and military intelligence agencies. After Saleh handed over the power to his vice president, Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi, the Houthis were able to penetrate into important military and security places. They were trained to use weapons, including American weapons, which were given to Yemen in the framework of anti-terrorism cooperation program, the most important part of which was a security package, which the Houthis transferred to Iran. The package contains secret information and technologies that have harmed the Americans and their partners in the anti-terrorism program in the region.^[2]

The Houthis, with support from Ali Abdullah Saleh, have acquired most of the Yemeni army's weapons, including heavy and modern weapons that were owned by the Republican Guard, the Special Forces and the Counter-Terrorism Forces. The latter were trained and supported by the United States.

In 2015, American media reported the disappearance of US counter-terrorism weapons in Yemen worth US \$ 500 million, including four Raven drones, 160 Humvees vehicles,^[3] hand weapons, helicopters, and transport planes.^[4]

All US-trained security units were under the leadership or supervision of Saleh's relatives, but after Saleh was forced to step down in 2012, some units were changed or removed. However, US officials acknowledged that some security units maintained their loyalty to Saleh and his family even after Saleh handed over the power. After the killing of Saleh, all security units became under the control of the Houthis. Those who refused to change their allegiance were imprisoned or stayed at home without salaries, or fled to areas under the control of the legitimate government. Some of them went to the western coast where the former commander of the Special Forces, Tariq Saleh, established a new military force against the Houthis, leaving behind an arsenal of advanced weapons.

According to an investigative report issued by a United Nations committee in February 2015, Ahmed Ali Abdullah Saleh, was accused of transferring an arsenal of weapons from the Republican Guard, after his dismissal from the position of commander of the Republican Guard in 2013, to a special military base in the Raimat Humaid camp in the town of Sanhan in Sana'a, the area of Saleh's family,^[5] which became in the hands of the Houthis after Saleh's death.

"Army weapons" are not the only source of Houthis' weaponry, as external sources like Iran and arms dealers like, Faris Manna,^[6] are two sources that the Houthis depend upon to obtain weapons they need. However, it is difficult for them to deliver armored vehicles, tanks and other types of heavy machinery to the Houthis, so they have established special workshops to convert four-wheel vehicles into armored vehicles, in addition to repairing and modernizing machines they looted from the army camps to use in their own military workshops.

On the contrary, the government forces in Marib suffer from a weak armament, as they have a few heavy weapons, which are old compared to the Houthis' weapons.

In fact, the army's weapons on several fronts are usually light and medium weapons, with scarcity of ammunition and the lack of workshops. In addition, some machinery have become out of date, some T-55 tanks, for example, have participated in several wars, including the six Saada wars against the Houthis.

US Counter-terrorism Weapons Program In Hands of Iranian Militias:

Information indicates that the Houthis, who have hidden some modern counter-terrorism weapons since 2015, began to use them in the recent attacks on Marib after they failed to achieve any progress since they resumed offensive against the governorate in February 2021, as they found violent resistance from the Yemeni army, supported by tribesmen, who are called "popular resistance" and the Saudi-led coalition.

The modern weapons the Houthis used in their internal battles against the government forces include T72 and T82 tanks, armored vehicles 202BM and 80 BTR, self-propelled guns, Katyusha missiles, surface-to-surface missiles, and surface-to-air missiles - some of these missiles have been modified to become surface-to-surface missiles, Scud missiles, and other Iran-made types of missiles.

In April 26, 2021, the northeast of the capital, Sana'a, was shocked with a violent explosion, which media reports said was due to a Houthi weapons store behind the Saudi-German Hospital, and some believe that the store was targeted by the Saudi-led coalition, but Abaad Center did not read a fixed account of what happened or obtained an official investigation into the accident, as it was rainy and clouds were covering the sky of Sana'a at the time, and people in the area did not hear any flying aircraft - which made some believe that the cache exploded accidentally.

But a military official said that the Houthi store was hit by a US drone. It told the Abaad Center, “Days before the strike, the Houthis transferred typical weapons from warehouses in southern Sana’a belonging to the former president Ali Saleh to several stores inside and outside the capital, including that store.” The source added that “those weapons include guided missiles (smart missiles) specialized for combating terrorism. They are short-range missiles for accurate assassinations, but it seems that the Houthis have modified them to be longer-range missiles with more explosion capacity.”

The military official’s hypothesis collides with the Yemeni army’s complaint that the US drones did not target US armored vehicles that were part of the anti-terrorism program during Saleh’s regime and became in the hands of the Houthis and being used in the Houthi attacks on Marib after some adjustment in Houthi workshops for military manufacturing, especially after the coalition refused to target them, according to military sources who spoke to Abaad.

The Abaad Center obtained an unofficial security report stating that the Houthi group used 30 American armored vehicles in its recent war on Marib, including 12 armored vehicles specialized for counter-terrorism program that was stopped after the fall of Sana'a in the hands of the Houthi militia. Other US armored vehicles, sold to the Emirati army, were taken over by the Houthis during confrontations.

The information says that most of the US armored vehicles are anti-mine type produced by the US Navistar company. They were subjected to some adjustment in manufacturing workshops to intensify their shielding capacity under the supervision of the Houthi Technical Insurance Department.^[7] Some of them were displayed in the Sabeen square in Sana’a as Bass-1 armored vehicles. Military sources affiliated with the government’s army said they faced difficulties in targeting this type of vehicles with anti-tank missiles.

Drones and Smart Missiles:

The Monitoring Department at the Abaad Center for Studies tracked some incidents to further confirm the hypothesis that the Houthis used specific US weapons that might be specialized for anti-terrorism operations.

Monitors have tracked the dimensions of drone crashes between 2019 and the first quarter of 2021. According to separate statements from the Houthi group, Abaad team was able to access to information, which may be less credible, that the Houthis managed to shoot down about eight drones, four of them were Chinese and other four were American. This means that the Houthis really possess guided missiles that are capable of shooting down this type of drones, some of which have the ability to fly and attack the target accurately from a level between three thousand and seven thousand meters. These missiles were possessed only by counter-terrorism units.

Seven drones, which were shot down, were carrying missiles and smart bombs, while the eighth was for reconnaissance. If the army found wreckage of only two drones, then the Houthis supposedly obtained weapons of at least five drones.

In February 15, 2017, a Coalition's Patriot mistakenly dropped an American drone of type MQ-9 Reaper in Marib. The drone was carrying four anti-armor missiles (AGM-114 Hellfire) and capable of carrying two bombs (Mk 82), all of which are mainly intended to combat terrorism. It relies on a laser guidance and correction system. If we take this into account, it means that the Houthis obtained qualitative weapons from those operations.

In addition to smart weapons and other arms the Houthis gained from former regime's counter-terrorism units and from drones they shot down during military operations, Iran certainly managed to get an access to the technology of drones and smart weapons after the Houthis transferred such technology that they confiscated from counter-terrorism units from Sana'a to Tehran.

Type of Drones/ Made in	Number of Shot down Drones	Date/Place of Targeting
Wing-long / China	2	April 12, 2020 (Saada) May 20, 2020 (Najran)
CH4 / China	2	December 22, 2020 (Marib) March 23, 2021 (Al-Jawf)
MQ-1 / U.S.A	1	May 15, 2019 (Sana'a)
RQ- 20 Puma / U.S.A	1	August 2020, Haradh (Hajah)
MQ-9 / U.S.A	2	June 8, 2019 (Hodeidah) August 20, 2019 (Dhamar)

Since the Houthis launched their attack on Marib in February 2021, they were able to attract three small batches of recruits on the western coast front, who joined the camps of Tariq Saleh after the killing of former president Ali Saleh, including important military experts, who were members of Saleh's elite forces, to operate some advanced weapons, including weapons for combating terrorism, such as advanced thermal goggles, some types of smart missiles, and decoding armored vehicles and other security programs. Military reports indicate that the Emirati forces used American missiles (AGM-114 Hellfire) directly in some operations of the Arab coalition on the West Coast front. It is one of a few countries that are allowed to acquire such kind of weapons, which means that Yemeni officers were trained there to deal with this type of missiles, so the polarization of some of those officers by the Houthi group creates fears that this type of weapons may fall in the hands of the Houthi militia.

Conclusion:

In addition to Washington's failure to preserve its weapons in Yemen, in particular those related to combating terrorism, the international community in general, especially the United States and the Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, have also failed to prevent Iranian advanced weapons from reaching the Houthis.^[8] They want also do not want to create a military balance by supporting the Yemeni army with advanced weapons to force the Houthis to end the war and start negotiations to achieve a sustainable peace. How will the US President face these complications in order to fulfill his promises to stop the war and bring peace to Yemen? Especially when the first decisions of his administration included the removal of the Houthi group from the terrorist lists to encourage them seriously engage in negotiations to end the Yemen's war, but the Houthi group responded to this US gift with more escalation against Marib and using US counter-terrorism weapons in its military operations.

References:

- [1] Official statement viewed in May 22, 2021 on the US State Department website: [https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-designates-houthi-militants/#:~:text=Today%2C%20the%20United%20States%20is ,to%20civilians%2C%20and%20destabilize%20 Yemen](https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-designates-houthi-militants/#:~:text=Today%2C%20the%20United%20States%20is,to%20civilians%2C%20and%20destabilize%20Yemen), and also included a link to the US Treasury Department's sanctions on Houthi leaders, Mohamed AbdulKarim Al-Ghamari and Yousef Al-Madani <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0191>
- [2] A military official revealed to a researcher at Abaad the anger of Americans due to the Houthis transferring technologies related to the anti-terror program to the Iranians
- [3] On multiple occasions, the Houthis managed to remove the GPS device from American vehicles making Pentagon and manufacturers unable to monitor their locations.
- [4] Craig Whitlock, The Pentagon Loses \$500 Million in Arms and Equipment Donated to Yemen, (Washington Post) Published in March 17, 2015: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-loses-sight-of-500-million-in-counterterrorism-aid-given-to-yemen/2015/03/17/f4ca25ce-cbf9-11e4-8a46-b1dc9be5a8ff_story.html?postshare=3951426615189453
- [5] 20 February 2015, Report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen, based on the Security Council Resolution 2140 (2014), UN Document S/2015/125
- [6] Faris Manna is an official in the Houthi Authority and a well-known arms dealer in the region, who was sanctioned on August 23, 2012, by the Security Council Committee, resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) regarding Somalia and Eritrea. His name is included in the list of individuals and entities subject to the travel ban, assets freeze and arms embargo in the Security Council resolutions on Yemen.
- [7] A researcher at Abaad Center got some names in the Houthis Technical Department supervising armored vehicles modification, which is managed by (A. Al-Banous, A. Al-Kibsi, A. Al-Faye), and in cooperation with a shielding company managed by (S. Al-Humaydah), and there are maintenance workshops, under the supervision of (H. Al-Houthi, A. Al-Moayad, A. Al-Kebsi), for maintenance and development.
- [8] On May 9, the US Navy's Fifth Fleet announced that the USS Monterey had seized a shipment of weapons in international waters in the northern Arabian Sea. An official later stated that the shipment was coming from Iran and bound for Yemen. (Cover Photo)



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