

# Tribe and Oil in Yemen's War ...

## The Battle of Marib



**Case Analysis**  
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## Introduction

Since the beginning of 2020, the Houthis have stepped up their war against the government forces to control oil and gas areas in east and north of the country, and secure the capital, Sana'a, and their stronghold in Sa'ada governorate against constant threat from the National Army to storm the two governorates.

The Houthis were able to secure Sana'a by forcing the government forces to retreat in several areas. The most important military advance by the Houthis was in Nihm district in eastern Sana'a late January 2020, four years after the government forces liberated it. As a result, the Houthis gained access to the main road to al-Jawf and Marib governorates, what actually enabled them to secure Sana'a and move towards al-Jawf, which is rich in oil in the north, adjacent to Sa'ada governorate and borders with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. They took control of the governorate's central city of al-Hazm in March 2020.

In June 2020, the Houthis made a strategic progress in al-Bayda governorate (the center of the country), which borders the strategic governorate of Marib, which is rich in oil and gas, from the southwest, and besieged Marib from al-Jawf, al-Bayda, Serwah and Nihm.

It was expected, through watching the map of Houthi progress, that the group would next move towards the oil and gas facilities in Safer region and the city of Marib, so that the group would begin its military campaign in July 2020 to actually control the last strongholds of the Yemeni government, which for some factors lost its control on the ground. The continued Houthi advance in the north was matched with an armed rebellion by the Southern Transitional Council that seeks to separate the south from the north with support from the UAE, despite the signing of a Saudi-sponsored agreement that guarantees the participation of the Transitional Council in a new government in exchange for relinquishing its military and security control on Aden and integrating its forces into the ministries of defense and interior.

The government's weakness of the governmental authorities reflected negatively on the capabilities of the "National Army and Resistance" affiliated to it on the ground, so the tribe, which looks for balances to achieve its own interests more than looking for victory or revenge, was present.

The Yemeni tribes differ from one region to another according to the state's presence in their areas. They are supportive to the state when the state is strong and can protect their own interests, otherwise the tribe seeks to be an alternative to the state in protecting its interests when the state becomes weak.

As for the eastern triangle of oil (al-Bayda, Shabwa, Marib and al-Jawf), the tribe emerged with double standards, as it stood by the weak and fragile state authorities that are unable to protect their interests, and sometimes the tribes were broken through by the Houthi militia. So what were factors behind these difficult choices?

In Shabwa governorate, the influence of the tribe disappeared as the state's presence became overwhelming and it could balance between defending the province at the security and military levels and making an economic development in the province. In the governorates of Marib, al-Jawf, and Al-Bayda, the tribe still takes the lead in the battles against the armed Houthi group for several "historical, societal, and ideological considerations, and also because of its interest in survival". This contributed to impeding the Houthis' complete control of the eastern governorates, in contrast to what the group had gained from tribal support that enabled them to control most of the northern governorates.

This position assessment discusses "the nature of the battle in the eastern oil provinces that are included in the "Sheba Region," which is one of the six regions that the Yemenis agreed upon in the National Dialogue Conference (2013-2014) as the form of the federal state, but the referendum on the constitution was not completed due to the Houthi invasion of the capital, Sana'a (September 2014), as a result of which the Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and his government were forced to leave the country. The study deals with Shabwa governorate, which has witnessed frequent events related to the race to control on the strategic gas project, Balhaf.

**Situation assessment focuses on the three dimensions of battle:**

- A) The tribal dimension, as the tribe is considered the main determinant in the "Sheba Region" and Shabwa, in war and peace.
- B) The balance of power, the capacity of each party to the conflict and the size of military progress or retreat and its impact.
- C) The political dimension, the size of the political gains or losses in the battle of controlling three governorates of the region, and the United Nations' visions of peace according to the results of this battle.

**First: the Tribal Dimension**

Before going into details of the tribal dimension in the current war, and answering the question: How did the parties deal with it to obtain military gains? You must know the importance of the tribe in Yemen, especially in the northern and eastern regions.

The tribe is one of the most important factors that affect the Yemeni state's policy at different times, a decisive factor in changing the system of the government in the country throughout history, and a central player in the politics of power. It is the largest pressure group in the country throughout the history of Yemen.

Historically, the tribal network filled the gap resulted from the lack of the state's capabilities and provided protection and met some needs: it ensured the security of the tribe's territories, protected water wells, and settled disputes between its members or between other tribes. The tribe was, in many ways, the first resort of material and social support during crises<sup>[1]</sup> through a social, legal and political process called (Al-Urf). It has its own means and procedures.

Although the prevailing regime in southern Yemen - before the unification in 1990 - prominently reduced the tribal pressure on the political authority, and the ruling party's policy was effective in stopping the tribe's interference in the political affairs, the tribe remained influential and the tribal system continued to be prevailing in social affairs. It was also clearly present during conflicts over the power.

The republican system in the north was established with support from tribes, and the British occupation in the south was expelled with support from tribes. The tribe was a stumbling block against secession attempts in southern Yemen in the 1994 summer war. The tribe's influence over power, laws, and even government appointments, army and security affairs continued.

The tribes kept their own laws and social systems, which are considered as an "imperative" and similar to a "first stance" court. The experience of the tribes is rich of norms because it was always linked to frequent Yemeni states and showed flexibility in dealing with successive authorities. Its members strongly affiliate to it and the tribal system is democratic in nature and no one is allowed to impose himself as a leader but through a consensus approval from all the tribe's members, similar to the local authority. There are more than 400 tribes in Yemen, but researchers trace their origins to five tribal references, Hashid, Bakil, Himyar, Kindah and Madhaj. More than 80% of the Yemeni people belong to these five tribes.

In the Sheba Region, for example, the people belong to two tribes, namely Madhaj and Bakil. The Al-Bayda and Ma'rib tribes belong to Madhaj tribe, while tribes of Al-Jawf belong to Dahm tribe, branch of Bakil tribe.

- Al-Bayda tribes:** one of the most prominent tribes in Al-Bayda are Qayfah tribe, which is the largest tribe in the governorate and its influence extends to five districts: Ould Rabi, Quraishi and Rada'a, the Omar tribe in "Thi Naem" district, the Malajim tribe in Al-Malajim district, the Al Awadh tribe in the districts of Radman and Naaman and the tribes of Natei district, the Al Humaikan tribe in the district of al-Zahir, the Al Azan tribe in the Al-Sawma'a district, the Al Rasas and Al Othalah in the district of Mukairas, the Daban tribe in the districts of Al-Mohafaza and Al-Bayda, Al Hayash, Al Taher, Bani Wahb, Al-Qaisiyyin and Al Abdullah) in Al-Taffah district, the Al Sawad tribe in Al-Sawadiyah district, the Sabah tribes in the Sabah district, tribes of Al-Arsh in Al-Arsh district, tribes of Al-Riyashiya in Al-Riyashiya" district, and Rayam tribe in Rada'a district, which may claim its affiliation with what is known as the Hashemite family,<sup>[2]</sup> and other small tribes in the province. Unlike other governorates in northern Yemen, most of these tribes belong to the "Shafei school of thought" - the doctrine which is widespread in the governorates of central and southern Yemen - so they were in a state of wars and constant battles with the "Imamate" regime that was based on the "Zaidy sect" in Sana'a. These tribes played a prominent role in the revolution of September 26, 1962 that ended the imamate rule and established the republican system in Yemen.
- Ma'rib tribes:** The Marib governorate includes a number of tribes that have emerged since ancient times in history. The most important of those tribes that are distributed for 14 districts in the governorate are: Murad tribe in the districts of Mahliya, Rahaba, Al-Jouba and Harib, the Abeedah tribe, which locates in the Wadi Ubaidah and Majma area, the center of Marib governorate, the Jahm tribe, the Jadaan tribe, the Bani Abd tribe in the Al-Abdiya district, and other small tribes of Harib district.

- **Al-Jawf tribes:** they belong to the Dahm tribe, which descends from the origins of the mother tribe, Bakil tribe. These tribes are distributed in 12 districts in the oil-rich province: the largest of these tribes are the Thu Hussain tribe, the Thu Muhammad tribe, the Bani Nouf tribes, the tribes of Hamdan, Al-Maatara, Al-Suleiman, Al-Masoud, Al-Amalsa, Al-Salem, Al-Dhul, Al-Shadawda, and the Mahbib, and the Muslim. These tribes originally belong to the two main tribes, Thu Hussain, which has eight branches, Thu Muhammad, with five branches and the sixth branch is Maatari,<sup>[3]</sup> in addition to the Al-Ashraf family, which also claims its affiliation with the Hashemite family.<sup>[4]</sup> If we follow the tribal characteristics and components in so far governorates, they have many ancient tribal structural characteristics and components, as they combine the characteristics of nomadic and agricultural life that depends on stable life. This community still adopts a lot of concepts of the traditional tribal life in its societal, political, business and individual relations. Wherever an individual stayed, in a city or abroad, he remains stuck to kinship and tribal affiliation, no matter how long he stays far from his tribal community, regardless of the style of his life or the degree of his education. The civic change in these tribes did not make much difference in the tribe's structure or decision-making, or even detachment of its members from any looming threat, unlike some tribes in the central regions of the country.
- **Strategic importance:** The importance of the three governorates comes from their important strategic location in oil and gas areas. Al Bayda governorate borders with eight governorates (Shabwa, Ma'rib, Sana'a, Dhamar, Abyan, Al Dhalei, Lahj and Ibb), characterized with extremely rugged terrain and spaced population centers. Marib borders the governorates of Shabwa, Hadramaut, Al-Jawf and Sana'a. It is important because it is a resource for the legitimate government, and contains the National Army training camps and the popular resistance opposing the Houthis.

The city managed to flourish, despite continued attacks by the Houthis. Its population rose from a few tens of thousands before 2015 to more than two million after the war as it represents a "safe zone for stability."

Al-Jawf governorate, which borders the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Marib, Amran and Sana'a, is considered a promising province in the field of oil wealth. According to a geological study entitled, "The Hidden Treasure in Yemen," prepared by international survey companies that are specialized in oil exploration,<sup>[5]</sup> Al-Jawf is the largest oil basin on the Yemeni-Saudi border.

In the National Dialogue Conference, the Houthis demanded the annexation of "Sa'ada", the stronghold of the group, to a region that includes Al-Jawf, but this proposal was rejected, and Sa'ada came within the Azal Region, which includes "Amran, Sana'a and Dhamar."

What raises the fortunes of the region of Sheba (Al-Bayda - Marib - Al-Jawf) in the future is the mineral and gas wealth.<sup>[6]</sup> In addition to the oil and gas that was extracted from Marib in mid-1980s, the Yemeni government previously discovered a huge gas basin in Al-Jawf. Marib also has the gas power station that supplies most of the Yemeni governorates with electricity.

- **Combat Doctrine:** fight between tribes and fight within the tribe for reasons related to revenge, reputation, hegemony, land and wealth. But the tribes are always united against the external enemy if it targets "religion, honor, and the lands of the tribe." The Shafei School is the only doctrine in Al-Bayda and Ma'rib governorates, while the Zaidy doctrine overlaps with the Shafei school in Al-Jawf governorate.<sup>[7]</sup> The religious doctrine has represented, throughout different periods of history, a starting point for tribes and human gatherings to unify their flag. It appeared clearly in the Al-Bayda governorate, where the tribes gathered in order to preserve their doctrine from the interference of the "Zaidies", the Houthis, the followers of the Zaidy sect, and it appears clearly in their calls for fighting against the Houthis in their "poems and songs."<sup>[8]</sup>

This does not negate the existence of a national ideology in the Houthi fighting during the past years. The tribes believe that targeting the state institutions by the Houthis is a targeting against the tribe that considers itself as part of the state. It also does not negate the role of political parties in pushing the heads of tribes and their sons to confront the Houthis because of their coup against the "constitutional authority" and the "Shura system" represented by the elections.

- **Imamate rule:** Yemeni tribes fought against the "Imamate rule" in the north of the country, and there is a long-standing hostility between the two parties since more than a thousand of years due to struggle for power. However, the Al Bayda, Ma'rib, and Al-Jawf tribes were the most revolutionary tribes against the rule of Imams, for doctrinal and humanitarian reasons. The battles took place between tribes and the Imamate regime's forces, especially in the last decades of the Imamate rule, as the tribes rejected submission to the Imamate rule and to its "injustice and tyranny". Yemenis believed that the Houthis seek to restore the Imamate rule and control the tribes. So the tribes are fighting against the Houthis to prevent the return of that era.<sup>[9]</sup> During the war, a clear defect occurred within the tribe and it started to fight according to its own interests. It has been divided between two parties or remained neutral. The tribe preparedness to fight any external parties has become imbalanced. The Houthi group (internal party) in cooperation with Iran, (external party) could recruit Yemeni tribes to fight against the legitimate authority (internal party) under the pretext of "loyalty to foreign parties." The tribes also supported the government army and were armed by Saudi Arabia and UAE (foreign party) to fight the Houthis who are supported by Iran. Also, the previous regime tampered with the structure and values of the Yemeni tribes, as it supported people loyal to it to lead those tribes, regardless of their eligibility. Those leaders were the first to fail in their war with the Houthi militia and gave up the tribe's values and principles.

## The Houthis Dealing with the Tribe:

The Houthis were partly able to weaken the Yemeni tribes in the northern areas under their control, in several ways that ultimately led to their neutrality and not the coup with the Houthis as a bloc against the legitimate government. In contrast to these tribes, the Houthis were unable to achieve a major breakthrough in the tribes in Al Bayda, Marib and Al Jawf. And it has emerged as one of the major obstacles to the Houthis.

Al-Jawf, which was the first target of the Houthis, witnessed its first battle in 2011, and the conflict continued between the Al-Jawf tribes until 2015, when the Houthis launched their war to control most of Yemen's governorates. Sheikh Al-Hassan Abkar, along with Sheikh Saleh Al-Rousa, Sheikh Amin Al-Akimi, and a number of Dahm tribes fought multiple rounds that exhausted the Houthis.

In early March 2020, the Houthis were able to achieve great progress in Al-Jawf after they managed to reach the governorate center, "Al-Hazm City," after controlling the Al-Ghail district in which some Hashemite families live, some of whom were loyal to the Houthis and others were fighting with the legitimate government.

The Houthi control of Al-Hazm opened the way to move towards the neighboring governorate of Ma'rib, the last stronghold of the legitimate government in the east of the country. The Houthis overlooked Marib from three sides (southeast from Qania in Al-Bayda, south from Serwah and north from Al-Jawf side) and the battle began in mid-July 2020.

The Houthi's control of Al-Jawf has also earned them new borders with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as Al-Jawf is linked to Saudi Arabia's "Najran" (Al-Hazm city is 150 km from the Saudi border).<sup>[10]</sup>

However, the dispersal of the Houthi forces between multiple fronts made this card that the Houthis obtained shaky. There are some indications that the government army forces, backed by tribal resistance, possibly will be able to retake the capital of Al-Jawf governorate after seven months of the control of the Houthis.

In Ma'rib, the tribes prevented the Houthis advance towards Shabwa and Hadramawt governorates and established tribal outposts,<sup>[11]</sup> the most famous of which were "Nakhla and Al-Suhail" in 2014, after the Houthis took control of Sana'a. The Ma'rib tribes fought the Houthis and were able to liberate most of their lands with support from the Arab coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, in October 2015, except for some parts of "Serwah" district. With every new Houthi attack, the tribes gather again to confront the Houthis. In Al-Bayda governorate, the "Qaifah tribe"<sup>[12]</sup> has stood against the Houthis since 2014. It is led by the Al-Thahab family, which Saleh managed to make a breakthrough by dividing it among brothers, but most of its members remained united against the Houthis. The Houthis worked to attract the Al-Dhahab family in order to break the thorn of the tribe, so the armed group supported Sheikh Ahmed Saif al-Thahab, and he was assigned to head the tribal cohesion council in the Al-Bayda governorate, then the Houthis chose him to be a representative in Parliament for the 131 district in the group's unrecognized elections. And since most of Qaifa tribe turned around the sons of Sheikh Ahmed Nasser al-Thahab and not his grandchildren, Sheikh Abdul-Raouf al-Thahab,<sup>[13]</sup> the youngest of Sheikh Ahmad Nasser al-Thahab's sons, was the tribal authority in the Qaifa area after his brothers Tariq and Nabil and a commander in American air strikes were killed before he was killed too.

The Houthi group was also able to attract Ahmed Abdul Wali al-Dhahab and placed him as commander of their 26th Armored Brigade.

As for the "Al-Humaiqani family" and "Al Omar" tribes, the Houthis failed to dismantle them, and they are still fighting against the Houthis until now.

It is clear that the two parts to the conflict, the legitimate government and the Houthis group, do not want to encroach on or clash with the tribal reality in the context of competition for power.

By mid-2020, the Al Awadh tribes <sup>[14]</sup> announced the move against the Houthis, whose leader, Sheikh Yasser Al-Awadi, a tribal, political and leader in the General People's Congress Party, continued with the Houthis until the death of "Saleh", then moved from Sana'a to live in the areas of his tribe.

At the beginning of this year, Al-Awadi tried to lead an uprising against the Houthis in his tribe, but the Houthis had already managed to cause a major rift in the family that turned support of a number of "Al-Awadi" cousins against Yasser al-Awadhi, and his uprising did not last days before it was suppressed by the Houthis.

In June 2020, despite the support that Al-Awadi received from the National Army and the Arab Coalition, some elders of "Al Awadh" doubt that the man did not intend to confront the Houthis as much as he wanted to register a position. Despite the tribal "nakf" that Yasser al-Awadhi called for and the meeting of tribal leaders in his tribe, he did not play his role in mobilizing and arming the tribesmen. So the Houthis' managed to flow into the district within weeks of negotiation.<sup>[15]</sup>

The defeat of Sheikh al-Awadhi reflected on the battle in the Sheba Region in general because the rapid collapse and the Houthis' takeover of huge weapons stores encouraged the Houthis to expand in Al-Bayda and then to towards Ma'rib.

## **Houthis' Management of Battles with Tribes:**

The Houthi armed group would not have been able to overrun the capital, Sana'a in September 2014, if it had not received help from former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who allied with them. Saleh used the network of his relationship that he woven throughout his reign (33 years) to facilitate the passage of the Houthis from their strongholds in Saada governorate to Sana'a.

The tribes are considered a large part of this network, as "Saleh" stopped its movements to confront the Houthis in its areas in Amran and Sana'a governorates.

After the intervention of Saudi-led Arab coalition in Yemen in support of the legitimate government in March 2015, the Houthis paid big attention to the tribes, including the tribes around Sana'a, Sana'a Ring Tribes, as they were able to change the equation in Sana'a for several reasons, including:

- The tribes were loyal to former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who became an ally to the Houthis until his death by the end of 2017.
- Failure to find a good model for legitimate government in areas liberated from the Houthis, through which it could absorb the tribes.
- The tribes' entry into covenants with the Houthis that ensure they will not attack the group in return for the Houthis not to interfere in the affairs of these tribes

**Despite this, the Houthis have restored the legacy of the imams, who ruled Yemen before 1962, in dealing with the tribes as follows:**

- **Creating parallel tribal leaderships:** igniting disputes and creating parallel tribal leaderships for the current tribal leaders. This approach is based on the escalation of "fourth-class" tribal sheikhs - defenseless sheikhs - with limited popularity and great loyalty to the group. In 2016, the Houthis established the "tribal cohesion council" and appointed one of the sheikhs of Saada (Dhaif Allah Rassam) as its head. Most of members of this council are tribal sheikhs appointed by the armed group. In every governorate under their control, a branch of the council is led by Houthi sheikhs in those provinces and they mobilize fighters in the name of the tribe. In 2018, the Houthis announced the establishment of the General Authority for Tribal Affairs, as another representative of the tribes - along with the tribal cohesion council - and a spokesman for the tribal leaders.

The group appointed Sheikh Haneen Qatinah, a sheikh from one of the regions of Sana'a, as its president. Despite the weak influence of the Authority and the Tribal Cohesion Council, the Houthis' treated with them as a representative of the tribes – assuming the role of pushing the tribes' sons to join the fronts of fighting against government forces, and giving them the powers to settle the disputants, and used to suppress the actual tribal leaders and marginalize them in favor of a new leadership.

- Tribal Honor Document:** From 2015 to 2019, the Houthis began pushing tribesmen to sign a document called the "Tribal Honor Document", which they considered as a "constitution for Yemeni tribes" that criminalize tribal leaders who refuse to mobilize members of their tribes to fight along with the armed group against the Yemeni government. The tribes were forced to fight with the Houthis. The document also calls for the "criminalization of traitors and agents, and confiscating their financial and employment rights." This document was used to blackmail the tribesmen and their leaders, as the Houthis continue to call on the tribesmen to "implement social isolation from tribal leaders and to turn against them."<sup>[16]</sup> <sup>[17]</sup> The Houthis consider it as a "fortification of the internal front" by preventing any movement by tribes against the armed group, whatever the reasons for any tribe's move.<sup>[18]</sup> The Houthis announced the start of their implementation in 2019,<sup>[19]</sup> and with the Houthi escalation in the governorates of Al-Bayda, Marib and Al-Jawf in early 2020, the group announced that it would use those who refuse to fight in their ranks - members of the tribes - as "human shields."<sup>[20]</sup>
- Signing Agreements with Tribes:** The Houthis signed agreements with a number of tribes, most of them in the north of the country. These agreements stipulate that tribes do not fight against the Houthis in return for allowing the tribes to manage themselves and not use the tribes' lands in the geography of the Houthi expansion. But the Houthis broke those agreements. The Houthi war against the Hajour area in Hajjah governorate in the north of the country in 2019 illustrates one of the incidents in which Houthis broke the agreements. The Houthis demanded an entry to Hajour and station in mountains in Hajour. When the tribal leaders refused and reminded the group about the agreement, the Houthi gunmen forcibly made their way towards those mountains and stationed there. The clashes erupted between the two parties and ended with killing dozens of tribesmen and the Houthis' control on the area.

- **Money and distrust:** Tribal fighting alongside any party depends on the position of their leaders, who focus only on the tribe's gains. Therefore, during the battles, the Houthis allocated money to the tribal sheikhs who are loyal to them. For example, the Houthis used to pay five million Yemeni riyals from the customs revenues of the "Afar" port in Al-Bayda governorate<sup>[21]</sup> to one of the sheikhs of Murad tribe in Marib to fight members of his tribe and the army forces.
- **Supporting tribal conflicts:** The Houthis encouraged tribal conflicts to be easy for them to control over the tribe and achieve a strategic victory. For example, the Houthi attempted to control important areas in Marib by encouraging war between the Al Ghannam and Al Jinnah tribes. The influence of the governor of Marib, Sultan Al-Arada, was strong enough to stop the internal fighting between the two tribes. The Houthis have also benefited from tribal conflicts in achieving the policy of (the white bull before the black). They go to one tribe under the pretext of supporting it to retaliate from the other tribe in exchange for only opening the way to the Houthis to cross. After they eliminate the enemy tribe, the Houthis recruit its sons to take revenge from the first tribe, so the group was able to open ways, get fighters, prevent the government from benefiting from the tribe, and achieve easy victories that facilitate their moving to other regions and tribes.

## Second: Houthi Operations to Reach Marib City

The city of Marib appears to be a bright spot, even if relatively, in a state of war with no end in sight. While the Houthis were targeting Marib with missiles and artillery, the governorate received hundreds of thousands of new displaced people who fled the Houthi hell in other areas. Governor Sultan Al-Arada would not have succeeded in turning Marib into a safe area, had it not been for the support of the tribe, society and political parties in Marib.

The relative stability of the city of Marib has attracted Yemenis even those looking to investments. It is believed that the population of the governorate has increased by more than five times than it was before the war. There are more than two and a half million people in Marib, most of them are displaced people who fled their areas because of the fighting in other parts of the country or they fled Houthi oppression in the Houthis-held areas.<sup>[22]</sup>

Sultan Al-Arada, a charismatic tribal leader and skilled politician, became governor of Marib in 2012, when political turmoil was ravaging the country.<sup>[23]</sup>

A few years later, the Houthis, who seized the capital, Sana'a, attacked the city of Ma'rib and besieged the city until the local fighters, with support from the Arab coalition's air forces led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, managed to repel them and force them to retreat and declare the governorate's liberation from the armed group in October 2015. The Houthis remained in Serwah district, which connects Marib to Sana'a governorate. **The Houthis began a new military operation <sup>[24]</sup> in mid-July 2020 to reach the city of Marib from three main axes:**

- **Border Directorates with Al-Bayda:** The Houthis' ability to suppress the "Al Awadh" tribes, advance in the Qaniya district in Al-Bayda governorate and reach the directorates in neighboring governorates of Marib (Mahliya, Rahaba, and Al-Abdiya) southwest of the governorate, contributed to the realization of the long-standing ambition of the Houthis to regain control of these directorates and try to advance towards the strategic A-Jubah directorate. The "Bani Abd" tribe, located in Al-Abdiya district between the governorates of Marib and Al-Bayda, has been facing widespread confrontations against the Houthis, and it has been the most prominent supporter of the army units in the Qaniyah region since 2017. Those forces are led by Brigadier General Saif al-Din Abd al-Rab al-Shaddadi, son of former commander of the third military region, Major General Abd al-Rab al-Shaddadi. The tribe is the biggest obstacle to Houthi control over many areas in Al-Bayda and Marib governorates. On September 10, 2020, the Yemeni army implicitly announced that it was fighting the Houthis on borders of "Al-Jouba" district, sending a military force from the "Baihan Axis" to the Mahliya /Rahaba front, and fighting in the "Najd Majmaah" area on border with the strategic "Al-Jawiya".

The powerful Murad tribes represent a stumbling block for the Houthis in Mahlia and Rahaba. However, the Houthis were able to gain a foothold in the Murad tribes' areas after they concluded an agreement with a number of its sheikhs, and this penetration of the tribe in the eastern regions is the most dangerous after the penetration that occurred to the tribes in Al-Jawf and resulted in the Houthis' control of its capital Al-Hazm in March 2020.

The southern and southwestern regions represent a threat to the local authority and government forces, as the Houthis were able to reach the line linking Marib and Shabwa, which is about 30 km from the confrontation line, after the Houthis advanced towards the mountains overlooking Al-Abdiya, adjacent to the Harib district, south of Marib.

- **Serwah District:** The clashes are taking place in three main areas, “the areas of Al-Kasara, the Hilan, and Al-Makh dara”, and the Houthis are trying to reach the strategic camp, “Mas,” where government forces are conducting the battle. Nearby, battles are taking place in the district of Medghal and the district of Raghwan, which is a vast desert. The two directorates live in strong tribes such as the "Jadaan, the Shaddad family, and the Zaba family." If the Houthis were able to control one of the two directorates, their forces would be a few kilometers away from the city of Marib. The government forces, with support from the tribal resistance, managed recently to make an important breakthrough on this front by controlling strategic locations on the Al-Khadara front that reduced the Houthis' chances of any progress towards Marib.
- **East of Marib and Al-Jawf:** In the "Majzar" district, clashes between the Houthis and the government forces have been going on for years, but the most prominent development was in Al-Jawf governorate, north and east of Marib, where government forces ignited a long fighting front that extends from "Khub Al-Sha`af district" east of Al-Hazm to "Majzar" in Marib. On the fronts of “Al-Alam and Al-Nudud, east of Al-labanat and Al-Jadfer in the desert” between Marib and Al-Jawf, which resulted from a wide advance of the National Army forces, during which the Houthi group were inflicted many losses.

In addition to a new front in the "Hawishian" area, where the army was able to control the strategic mountain, in addition to the "Al-Nudud" area, which is an important area that may help the government forces to quickly reach the Al-Hazm area, the center of the governorate, which the government lost in March 2020. It will enable the army to cut off the Houthi supply lines towards the strategic building blocks.

The Yemeni government's regaining control of the "Al-Hazm" district makes the city of Marib breathe as it lifts the siege imposed by the Houthis on it from the north and east, but the government gains in that area will remain under threat if the Houthis continue to control the "Al-Jawf's junction".

**The Houthis would not have been able to gain a foothold in (Marib, Al-Jawf and Al-Bayda), if some considerations related to the tribe, the war and the parties to the conflict had not been available:**

- Some tribes have set their position on the Houthi war, based on the number of their sons in leadership positions within the legitimate government. Also, some tribes refused to push back the Houthis due to the bad relationship of their sheikhs with leaders of the National Army or local authorities.
- Some tribesmen and their sheikhs - especially in villages - failed to fight the Houthis and let them pass through their areas because they believed that Saudi Arabia and the coalition had let down the legitimate government and agreed with the Houthis. So they preferred the safety of their sons and lands, considering that "the battle will be settled for the Houthis."<sup>[25]</sup>
- Some tribes have retreated from fighting the Houthis because the Saudi leaders contacted some tribesmen and gave them money, cars and weapons, and did not deal with the legal sheikhs of those tribes.<sup>[26]</sup> In addition, other tribes allowed the Houthis to pass through their lands to other tribes due to vengeance disputes between the two sides.

- Some tribes have made their decision and took stance against the legitimacy because the governor, whom the legitimate government appointed, was weak or corrupt, as happened in Al-Bayda.<sup>[27]</sup> The personal sophistication and behavior of the governor may be one of the criteria that affect the tribes fight against the Houthis. Tribes in Ma'rib stood by their governor, Sultan al-Arada and prevented the advancement of the Houthis, while the tribal dispute between some tribes in Al-Jawf and its governor, Amin al-Okaimi, allowed the Houthis to control the governorate's capital, al-Hazm. Tribes in al-Bayda have complaints against their governor. This situation was reflected on the battles on the ground.

- The relationship of tribal sheikhs and social personalities with the regime of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Some of them allowed the Houthis to pass in defiance of the legitimate government that came after the revolution of February 11, 2011. At the same time, the tribe's relationship with the Islah party and Saudi Arabia pushed its sheikhs to fight the Houthis.

Most of the population of Al-Jawf has been under the Houthi control since 2014. Most of them did not fight against the Houthis in Al-Hazm because their homes are under the control of the Houthis, who do not hesitate to loot and explode them or to confiscate agricultural lands there.

## How do Houthis manage their battles in the tribal areas in Marib?!

The Houthis continue to advance in the tribal areas of Marib using the same way they did with tribes in other regions, but their method faced obstacles this time, the most important of which are:

- **Early organization of the tribes:** Marib, like Al-Jawf, did not fall into the trap of partisan rivalry when the Houthis seized Sana'a in September 2014. Unlike the tribes in the vicinity of the capital, Sana'a, which fell into partisan rivalry and their leaders were divided into supporters and opponents to the "revolution of 11 February 2011." The Marib's tribes fought against the Houthis without divisions, except for specific personalities, who had no influence in the region.

The retaliation, which occurred between the political parties, in particular the General People's Congress and the Islah party, caused confusion among all national and social forces. This confusion provided a good ground for the Houthis to expand throughout the country. The partisan discord and the division of politicians transferred to the tribal leaders, who were divided between the two camps, “revolution” and “counter-revolution.” This division was in the interest of the Houthi militias that do not want to see a political action or a social organization that parallels their powers.

In the middle of this conflict, Marib appeared noticeably as a survivor, and remained united to oppose the Houthis and prevent them from entering the governorate's capital. It can be noted that Marib also claims to confront the Houthis: In August 2014, the expanded public meeting of the Sheba Region's tribes was held in the “Al-Sahil” region. A “covenant and charter” document was signed. The document called for the Houthis to withdraw from the tribes' lands and for mobilizing 12 thousand fighters from the region to confront the Houthis and what they described as the forces of terror and sabotage.<sup>[28]</sup> In October 2016, the governors of the three governorates in the Sheba Region announced the establishment of the region and the selection of governor of Marib, Sultan Al-Arada, as its president "until a referendum on the constitution and a regional president election would be made by sons of the three governorates."<sup>[29]</sup>

- **The impact of differences within the camp of the legitimate government failed:** in contrast to the divisions created by the UAE in the camp of the Yemeni government in the southern governorates, which also targeted the tribes and their leadership, and the political and social components in the liberated governorates. The local authority in Marib governorate was able to have a good relationship to gain internal and external support, so tribes, parties, and political components were united within the framework of the local authority. The UAE did not directly show its hostility to the political leadership in Marib, despite accusation by Abu Dhabi that Marib is affiliated with the Islah party. Nevertheless, the Houthis have created gaps between some tribal leaders in Marib, relying on ancient disputes between tribes and their aspirations for power.

The state of division created by the Arab coalition within the camp of the legitimate government contributed to creating these gaps, which we will explain later.

- **Economic Development:** Marib turned into a real economic development. Its administration was not only interested in deterring the Houthis and protecting the capital of the governorate, but rather the city prospered economically, unlike other governorates liberated from the Houthis. Marib, and its tribes in particular, already feel that development and economic prosperity have brought them interests that they must fight to protect.
- **Tribal support from other governorates:** The city of Marib has turned into a destination for internally displaced people from northern Yemen, most of them belong to the tribes. These tribes set up their own camps and assemblies in the desert to resist the Houthis. The army forces did not reach those areas, so Sheikh Rabish bin Kaalan Al-Ali, a prominent Sheikh of Sana'a and a member of the Parliament, was killed in a battle with the Houthis in Serwah. Among those assemblies: the resistance councils in "Sana'a, Dhamar, Ibb and Tihama." The people of those governorates fight alongside the National Army on fronts of Ma'rib, Al-Jawf and Al-Bayda. These seem to be important factors of strength for Ma'rib, compared to other tribes in northern Yemen.

**However, the Houthis managed to make a simple breakthrough in the oil governorate, threatening millions of displaced people. The most prominent ways that enabled Houthis to make that penetration include:**

- 1- **Signing agreements with some tribal sheikhs:** The Houthis proceeded with their preferred method of entering the tribal areas through signing agreements that allow the Houthis to cross the tribal areas to other areas where government forces are located.

This is what happened in the Murad tribe, where the Houthis announced the signing of agreements with a number of tribal sheikhs in “Rahaba,” including: “Abdul Jalil al-Qardaei, Mohamed Hussein al-Qardaei, Ahmad Hussein al-Qardaei, and Anshala al-Qarda'I,<sup>[30]</sup> and Sheikh Ahmed Ali Jawhara, Ahmed Mohamed Abu Awsha, and Fahd Abdullah Mohamed Jahlan. What is ironical is that these news were widely reported in Iranian newspapers, which appear to be deeply interested in the war in Yemen.<sup>[31]</sup>

Hussein Hazebe, a tribal sheikh in Murad tribe, and a leader in the General People's Congress Party, supported splits within his tribe, so the Houthis appointed him in the position of a minister in their government that is not recognized internationally.

**2- Houthi cells:** The Houthis depend on cells of several individuals, sometimes dozens of individuals from some Hashemite families to find a foothold in Marib. One of those cells was the “Mohsen Subayan cell”, which consisted of eight members, who were killed in a military operation by the government forces in July 2020,<sup>[32]</sup> in conjunction with Houthi attack on Marib. The Houthis took advantage of the killing of all members of their cell in an attempt to mobilize the tribes in the governorates of Marib and Al-Jawf and other northern governorates, under the pretext of "tribal nakaf" against government forces in Marib.<sup>[33]</sup> In July 2019, the security forces managed to put an end to an attempted rebellion in the Al-Ashraf areas of the Marib governorate against the government forces<sup>[34]</sup>

**3- The Terrorism Card:** When the Houthis took control of areas in Qaifat Rada'a in Al-Bayda governorate, the group announced that they had cleansed the area from the ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and killed the leader of the Islamic State organization in the area. Al-Bayda governorate is one of the areas in which Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has increased its activity since 2014. The "Qaifat Radaa" tribes have a history of fighting against the organization before the arrival of the Houthis, as they contributed to pushing the organization out of the areas in 2012 and 2013.<sup>[35]</sup> The family and the tribe disavowed Sheikh "Tariq al-Dhahab", who contributed to the entry of the organization's members into their areas. He lost influence and protection from the tribe until his death.<sup>[36]</sup>

The IS organization rushed to the "Al-Manasah" areas and left them after negotiations with the tribes.<sup>[37]</sup> Most of the tribes would not have been fighting the Houthis in Al-Bayda governorate. If we exclude the tribes of the "Al Humaikan", the tribes were aware that their power was not enough to fight the Houthis and the forces loyal to the former president Ali Abdullah Saleh, so they signed agreements. The Houthi fighters crossed and did not use their lands for fighting. But after the Houthis made victory, they broke the agreements and committed violations against the tribes and their sheikhs. The Houthi's entry into al-Bayda provided al-Qaeda with an opportunity to gain influence on the ground and return to al-Manaseh, from which they were expelled in early 2013.

Nabil al-Dhahab - the brother of Tariq, who was a leader in the Ansar al-Sharia group, affiliated with al-Qaeda in Yemen, until his death in a US drone attack in November 2014, attended a meeting held in Al-Manasah in October 2014, in which some tribal leaders participated to discuss the Houthi threat.

The AQAP fighters became active in the fight against the Houthis, and their numbers increased. The tribes that curbed the influence of Al Qaeda in the governorate in the past are no longer ready to do so again because they and Al Qaeda have a common enemy.<sup>[38]</sup> But Al Qaeda also found another battlefield for it that reduced the impact of its confrontation with the Houthis, as it entered into intermittent confrontations with the ISIS in the area.<sup>[39]</sup>

The Houthis and the Islamic State, which is still an unknown formation, are in accord to fight the government forces and tribesmen. The ISIS has launched several operations against government forces and tribesmen, as the organization accuses them of being affiliated with the Yemeni army. According to the Qaifah tribesmen, "the coordination between the Houthis and ISIS has become visible to the public.

They shared roles in breaking the Qaifah resistance fronts. The ISIS participated in fighting the resistance from the back to cut the supply routes and opened a way for the Houthis to attack the tribes."<sup>[40]</sup>

4- Supporting voices that criticize the local authority: Some tribal sheikhs in villages - population units smaller than the districts - believe that the local authority had excluded the tribes' members, so they demanded quotas in the government jobs and positions.<sup>[41]</sup> At least one tribal sheikh in the "Juba" region complained that "the local leadership freezes independent voices as their own."<sup>[42]</sup> A tribal sheikh said that the UAE supported tribal leaders in Marib to raise voices accusing the local authority of exclusion and marginalization, and fueling internal division between the Al Murad tribe and other tribes of Marib.<sup>[43]</sup>

The governorate of Marib is divided into four branches in terms of tribal clans and administrative division, namely: Abidah, Serwah, Jadaan and Murad. Abidah - to which the governor belongs - covers two-thirds of the governorate of Marib in terms of area. It is also the richest region in the governorate and contains the largest oil and gas reserves in northern Yemen. It also holds the oil exploration companies and the Marib Gas Power Station, on which many Yemeni governorates depend to get electricity, especially the capital, Sana'a.

### **Tribes' position towards the government:**

The Yemeni army has stopped recruiting in its ranks since 2017, and it could not pay salaries to soldiers on the battle fronts, which has led to a decline in the number of government forces confronting the Houthis. So the pressure on the tribesmen in their fight against the Houthis increased. Although the tribes have some observations on the performance of the legitimate government, most of them are convinced to fight the Houthis and prevent their intrusion into their areas.

**Most of the tribal leaders in the three governorates were reluctant to voice their remarks about the legitimate government's approach towards their tribes, but a number of tribal leaders referred to a number of points:<sup>[44]</sup>**

- Despite President Hadi's directives to absorb the tribesmen, who joined the popular resistance, in the National Army, after more than five years have passed, the resistance's members are still outside the scope of the National Army.
- Tribal leaders say that the legitimate government neglects the families of the martyrs and wounded fighters, and makes the tribes bear the burden of taking care of "orphans" and fears of losing their members.
- The tribes question the ability of the legitimate government to pay the costs of war and reinforce support with ammunition and weapons, at a time when it is unable to secure the salaries of its soldiers. The tribes have fears that they may bear the consequences later. Tribal leaders say the restrictions imposed by the coalition against the legitimacy and the governors negatively affected the role of the tribes in confronting the Houthis.
- The apparent disparity in salaries and equipping the fighters on the Saudi border fronts against the Houthis, and tribesmen and soldiers in government-controlled areas. The border fronts are attracting fighters from the Sheba Region, while the dangers loom over their areas.
- Excluding the sons of the three governorates from ministerial and sovereign positions, or in commanding positions in military units, which is a mistake that the government did not seriously find a solution for it, so it may be a timed bomb.
- The tribes feel that they are not facing the Houthis as the only enemy and that there is a clear pressure from the coalition on the government and that the tribes pay the price for it on the ground.
- The size of armament and military support for tribes, from the government and the coalition, does not amount to the seriousness of the battle. Rather, part of that support went to individuals associated with the Houthis.

### Third: The impact of the Marib battle on the country's unity

The results of war in Marib will directly affect the unity of the country, as the defeat or victory of the government forces will determine that. The fall of Marib means that chances of the secession of the south will double after the majority of northern governorates became in the hands of the Houthis.

The governorates of Marib and Shabwa are the two governorates that absolutely owe loyalty to the legitimacy of President Hadi, and constitute a stumbling block to the rupture of the country, it is important to address the situation of Shabwa through the war in Marib.

**There are a number of determinants that make the war in Marib affect the situation in Shabwa governorate, including:**

- 1- Community and tribal overlap between the two governorates.
- 2- Shabwa governorate exports crude oil from Marib through an oil pipeline that extends from Safer to the Nashima port, alternative to Ras Issa port in Hodeidah, which is controlled by the Houthis.
- 3- In Shabwa governorate, there is the project of the liquefied natural gas in Balhaf, the largest economic project in Yemen. It represents a strategic importance to the government. So by losing the project, the government will lose the last economic card in its hand.
- 4- There is a belief among the Emirati-backed Transitional Council that the fall of Marib in the hands of Houthis will facilitate its control on Shabwa governorate, under the pretext of protecting it from the Houthis, while the Houthis believe that the fall of Marib will enable them to reach Shabwa to control the important source of oil and gas in the country.

## Shabwa between tribe, state and external influence:

What distinguishes Shabwa governorate is the overwhelming presence of the state, which led to the decline of the tribal role in Shabwa in many issues, particularly in military and security issues. For many people, this situation seems to be normal, whenever the state is present to achieve the interests of the tribe, the tribe supports the state. However, others believe that Shabwa is a good model of tribal society cohesion and its full coordination with the state authority (the governorate leadership).

In Shabwa, there is a port in Balhaf for exporting the liquefied natural gas, which is the largest economic project in Yemen.<sup>[45]</sup> The local community had formed popular committees to protect the facility after the fall of the Second Marine Corps Brigade in April 2015. The committees remained there until early 2017, when the Emirati forces used Balhaf as a military base.

In August 2019, the Emirati-backed (Shabwani Elite) brigades rebelled against the government and engaged in confrontations with the government forces, which subsequently took control of all the elite brigades, except for two military sites, which are the port of Balhaf- despite the arrival of government forces to the vicinity of the port- and the Al-Alam Camp in the Shabwa's desert, 50 km from the capital of Shabwa governorate, Ataq. Since that time, soldiers at the two sites have been switched in coordination with the government forces and the state authorities in Shabwa.

Recently, official and popular calls have raised to demand the resumption of gas exports from Balhaf. Protests took place in September 2020 for the same purpose. Officially, the governor of Shabwa Mohamed bin Adyou called at a celebration on the 58th anniversary of the September 26 revolution, for the evacuation of forces in the vicinity of Balhaf facility and restoring its status as an economic institution.

Early in October 2020, a marine mine targeted an oil tanker<sup>[46]</sup> in the port of Nashima - a port that the local authority has rehabilitated to export crude oil from Marib, 30 kilometers away from Balhaf. The incident was read as an expression of the concern of the UAE-backed Transitional Council over the development movement in Shabwa, which totally depends on 20% of the oil sales out of 35%, which represents the government's share, not exceed 12 thousand barrels per day. This means that Shabwa gets only 840 barrels of oil per day, "but it helped in an unprecedented development revolution in the deprived governorate for decades, especially in the field of roads, electricity and water networks."<sup>[47]</sup>

The bombing incident, which caused damage to one of the oil tankers, called for security action and the deployment of the army. The security committee took a decision to secure the coast. Thus, the restoration of the port of Balhaf as an economic facility has become a security and an economic goal for the governorate's leadership to secure an additional source of income to support the national economy and stop the deterioration of the national currency.

The local authority's complete control over the port of Balhaf is still governed by the results of the battle of Marib, in light of the ambition of the UAE-backed Transitional Council to control the most important economic facility in the country.

## **Fourth: The battle of Marib is in the balance**

The battle of Marib places the parties to the war at a crossroads. The country may be pushed into a new complicated situation and it will affect not only the parties to the conflict, but also the societal components. Each side sees the "battle of Marib" from the point of view of its own interests and its impact.

- **The Houthis:** The Houthis justify the battle of Marib by spreading a rumor in the capital, Sana'a, that "the local authority in the Marib governorate has violated an agreement sponsored by the United Nations, which provides for the sharing of oil and gas revenues with the Houthis in Sana'a, and refused to hand over the Houthi's share of oil and gas." The Houthis say that the battle of Marib "is the last battle with the Yemeni government, and after that it will be a complete and comprehensive victory for the group, and a return to development." The recent rumor comes as part of the Houthis' efforts to mobilize more tribal fighters to fight on the Marib front. If the Houthis win the battle of Marib, they will have won the war for controlling the north, at least for the time being. However, the Houthis will not announce the end of the war as they are promoting in their areas of control due to several reasons. The war provides them with a cover of legitimacy that they lack in a complex society, especially with their failure to form political alliances, as they killed their ally, former President Ali Saleh in December 2017. The war also gives the Houthis an excuse to justify the acute living crisis and cover up their mismanagement and corruption.<sup>[48]</sup> The Houthis seek to go far to Shabwa, Hadramawt, and even Mahra governorate, on border with Oman.
- **The legitimate government:** The legitimate government's loss of Marib means the fall of its last strongholds, after the control of the Southern Transitional Council, backed by the UAE, on most of the southern governorates. The government will be in the weakest state in the event of any negotiations with the Houthis or other new parties that have emerged from war. The Houthi control of Marib will make it difficult for the government and the tribes allied to it to wage war on the Houthi areas, and most of the fighting fronts in the east and north, including the front of Nihm, east of Sana'a, will stop. Government forces use Marib as a military base to fight the Houthis.

The city is also the headquarters of the Yemeni General Staff and the Ministry of Defense, so the government forces are fighting in a zero-sum battle with the Houthis. Losing the region or being affected by Houthi attacks makes the war efforts during the past years in a blowing wind, and this is what led to the relative steadfastness of the government forces and even progress as in the battles to restore Al-Hazm, the capital of Al-Jawf.

It seems that the Houthis are benefiting from the failure to implement the agreements. For example, since the Stockholm Agreement was signed between the Houthis and the Yemeni government in December 2018, the military operation to liberate Hodeidah from the Houthis was halted, and the balance of war tilts in favor of the Houthis. The Yemeni government did not achieve its goal from the agreement to stop the sources of income of the armed group.

The Houthis transferred fighters from Hodeidah to the rest of the country's governorates, including the governorate of Marib. The agreement became a "burden" for the government and an opportunity for the Houthis.

- **Saudi Arabia and the Emirates:** The Houthis are already penetrating deep into the Yemeni governorates on the border with Saudi Arabia. Controlling Marib will not only give the Houthis valuable resources, but also a new threat to Saudi Arabia on its borders, in addition to Al-Jawf, which has a long border with Saudi Arabia. It also threatens the presence of its forces in the governorates of Mahra, Hadramawt and Shabwa. The Houthis' motive to move towards the city of Marib is the coalition's changing policy towards its allies on the ground. Saudi Arabia and the UAE look at Marib as an influence of the "Islah Party ", so the Saudis and the Emiratis agree to turn the war in Marib into an exhaustion front for both the Houthis and members of the Islah Party, which considers Marib as the last area to secure the Islah members who fled the oppression of the Houthis in the north, and the Southern Transitional Council backed by the UAE in the south.

This indicates that the two countries did not benefit from the lesson of the fall of Sana'a in the hands of the Houthis in 2014, as officials in both countries believed that the Houthi's rush towards Sana'a could exhaust the Islah party, one of the most prominent political components that supported the uprising that removed "Ali Abdullah Saleh" in 2011. This plan against Islah led to heavy costs, not only for Yemen, but for the Gulf, in particular the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

- **The Southern Transitional Council:** Leaders in the Southern Transitional Council believe that the Houthi group's control of Marib will facilitate their advance to Shabwa to control it under the pretext of protecting it. They also believe that it is possible to reach an agreement with the Houthis to prevent their entry into southern Yemen, which would speed up the implementation of their separation project. The transitional believes that controlling Marib will be a fatal blow to the Yemeni government, as the city of Marib hosts the training camps of the pro-government presidential protection forces, and was a starting point for the government forces' movement in 2019, when the Southern Transitional Council announced its control of the southern governorates with support from the UAE. The dismantling of the National Army forces in Marib makes the implementation of the military part of the Riyadh Agreement useless, and it makes the forces of the Transitional Council a separate force. The Southern Transitional Council and its continued delay in implementing the Riyadh Agreement and the withdrawal of its forces from Abyan governorate increases the pressure on the government forces to confront two enemies, the Houthis and the STC. During the recent Houthi battles in Marib, there were sporadic confrontations in Abyan governorate between the transitional council and government forces, which makes it more difficult for the army to reinforce its forces in Marib.
- **West Coast battles:** The military operations along the western coast of Yemen are restricted with a truce between the two parties (the Houthis and the coalition's Joint Forces)<sup>[49]</sup> according to the Stockholm Agreement (2018), but violations happen from time to time.

Some officials in the Joint Forces - and the General People's Congress Party, which is loyal to the family of former President Ali Saleh - believe that the Houthis' arrival in the city of Marib will contribute to increasing their fortunes as they are the main party in any peace agreement.

But the battle in Marib in both cases: the Houthis defeat or victory, will further escalate the fighting on the country's western coast, as the Houthis' defeat in Marib will put the armed group before only one option, which is to secure the city of Hodeidah to strengthen its negotiating position.

In the event of the Houthis' victory, the armed group will direct its forces towards the western coast to stop the "Saleh family" from obtaining a presence within the peace agreement, and to secure the port of Hodeidah from the coalition and government offensive to strengthen the government's negotiating position.

Since the beginning of October 2020, the fighting has escalated in the directorates of "Hais" and "Al-Durayhimi" in Hodeidah. The Houthis launched continuous attacks to strengthen their presence in Al-Durayhimi and to lift the siege on their groups stationed in the district's center. Despite the United Nations' calls to stop the military escalation,<sup>[50]</sup> the fighting increased to indicate a change in the dynamics of the war outside the Stockholm Agreement.

- **Humanitarian crisis:** The battle of the Houthis in Marib caused a major humanitarian crisis. When the Houthis approached to the city of Marib, more than two million people were displaced to other areas of Marib. Although the Houthis failed until now to takeover Marib, the group's practiced its tendency of revenge as usual and targeted Marib with ballistic missiles and drones, and it may target major economic interests such as the Oil Refinery, oil blocks and other vital installations in the city.
- **The United Nations' Peace Plans:** Currently, the escalation of the Houthis has made international efforts to end the conflict more difficult. He explains the Houthis' slowdown in dealing with the "peace file" since the group's advance in Nihm and Al-Hazm in Al-Jawf at the beginning of this year and turning to war options.

In March 2020, the Houthis rushed into the war, although they welcomed a UN-brokered truce proposal in March 2020, "to stop armed clashes around the world due to the Coronavirus crisis." Two weeks after, the Saudi-led Arab coalition announced a ceasefire, but the Houthis rejected the truce announced by the coalition - which was extended for other weeks - and the Houthis justified this as a "media circumvention and political propaganda."

In the midst of the war and the mobilization of fighters for the battle of Marib, the Houthis presented their vision to end the war, which is based on desires that make them victorious through forcing the coalition and the government to stop the war in exchange for stopping ballistic missiles and drones on Saudi Arabia.

The eight-page document places the entire burden of ending the war and addressing the course of the Yemeni economy on the Saudi-led coalition. Even in the signature part, the Houthi group put "the coalition", not the Yemeni government, led by Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi.<sup>[51]</sup>

The Houthis' stance on the armistice and their boldness to present their "list of desires" to end the war according to their conditions indicate the extent to which they have benefited from the continuing war and the poor situation of their opponents in the internationally recognized government. This was evident in the following weeks, when the Houthis advanced towards Marib.

Given the importance of the city of Marib for the status of the legitimate government and its supporters, efforts to make "peace" have become more complicated than ever, and on the contrary, they may lead the country to a new complexity that may lead to "ending the Stockholm Agreement."

There have been increasing calls<sup>[52]</sup> for the legitimate government to abandon the "Stockholm agreement."<sup>[53]</sup> So the long-stalled military operation to retake the port city of Hodeidah from the Houthis under the "Stockholm" agreement should be resumed to make a crucial change on the ground that would push the Houthis to an agreement that stops their expansion in government-held areas and ends the state of war.

- **The humanitarian situation in Marib:** the humanitarian situation in Marib is getting worse because of intense confrontations between the army and the Houthis. Marib contains camps for thousands of displaced people. More than two and a half million people live in the city of Marib, most of them have been displaced several times during the war years. The clashes in the south and west of the governorate have displaced thousands of people, in addition to more than 70,000 people who have been displaced from Al-Jawf and Al-Bayda since March 2020. In case the war continues, more people will be displaced.<sup>[54]</sup> The continuation of the Houthi offensive in Marib - even if Houthis remain far from the city - will deepen what is already the largest humanitarian emergency in the world. If the fighting spreads to the oil installations and cuts off energy supplies and the highway to the east, there will be only one difficult road heading south as an escape corridor towards Shabwa governorate, where relief organizations have a symbolic presence and will not be able to accommodate millions of newly displaced people at the same time. The relief work officials in Yemen believe that the Houthi's rush to the city of Marib could lead to the suffering of residents there much more than the residents of Hodeidah, given the number of displaced people there and their inability to afford travel expenses. In the case of Hodeidah, the UN-sponsored negotiations led to the "Stockholm Agreement" that stopped the war, and humanitarian reasons were the main factor of progress towards the agreement and ceasing military operations. This justifies the anger of residents against the international community and the United Nations due to their silence towards the Houthis and not taking serious action against the Houthis' attacks as happened in Hodeidah, despite the visit by the UN envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths and his statement about the gravity of the situation.<sup>[55]</sup>
- **The Yemeni tribe:** Marib is considered the last tribal buffer against the Houthis, as mentioned so far, compared to the tribes of other governorates. The Houthis' subsequent treatment of other tribes in the north in a humiliating manner illustrates the way the group will manage the Marib tribes file.

Although the Houthis were able to win over "defenseless" sheikhs within the Murad tribe and within the "families of Al-Ashraf", this does not represent a crack in the formation of the tribe itself, but it does give a warning to the tribes, the government and the local authority to strengthen their presence and support the tribes with money, weapons and fighters to protect their areas.

While Marib tribes fear the Houthis' control, Yemeni tribes in other governorates feel that their future is at risk due to the Houthis' campaign to dismantle the last and hardest tribes in Marib, Al-Bayda and Al-Jawf. So, members of those tribes, who are exist in Marib, will have a role in protecting the city from the Houthis.

## Scenarios for the battle of Marib

What is happening in Marib is a zero-sum battle of attrition without victory for either side. The huge numbers of deaths during the past two months make it clear that the "battle of Marib" was the biggest battle ever during the war years. The two parties refuse to disclose the human losses, but the funerals on both sides can be observed. Unlike the government, the Houthis publish reports about the funerals of some of their victims in their areas of control. The Abaad Center counted the funerals of at least (707) Houthis during the month of September 2020, including three Major General, 17 brigadiers general, 27 colonels, 22 lieutenant colonels, 29 majors, and 21 captains.<sup>[56]</sup> Since most of the other fighting fronts are weak, most of them were killed in confrontations with the government forces and tribesmen in Marib and Al-Jawf governorates.

## Accordingly, expected scenarios can be as follows:

**The First Scenario:** the victory of the Yemeni government by securing the governorate of Marib, and breaking the Houthi move in which the group used all its power and mobilized for it as "the last battle and the mother of all battles." By achieving this, the war decision within the government forces will be rearranged, and the forces will be rearranged away from international pressure on the coalition, which will pave the way for a large-scale liberation process.

If the Yemeni government and the tribes manage to achieve a victory, it will tempt tribal leaders in other governorates to move in order to deplete the group's power, weaken its circles of money and mobilization, and regain their spirit of initiative that they lost during the past years because of the Houthi transgressions on them.

## What support this scenario are the following:

- A) The powerful resistance of the government forces and tribesmen, despite the large Houthi mobilization of fighters from all provinces under their control, and their inability to achieve a real breakthrough in the tribes in the governorate during the past months.
- B) The strategic importance related to the governorate as the last stronghold of the legitimate government, the remaining home for those who oppose the Houthi group, and the home of oil and gas, which represents an important resource for the government.
- C) Saudi Arabia rejected the fall of the province at a time that it invests the continuation of the battle to exhaust all parties.
- D) The government army's victory against the Houthis will make the Houthis lose their euphoria of victories and may push them to make concessions - instead of the boldness shown by the group in the proposal presented by the UN envoy Martin Griffiths, despite the proposal aims to save Saudi face, not to stop the war against the Yemenis.

E) The advance of the government forces towards the capital of Al-Jawf governorate, Al-Hazm, is also an important indicator of the victory scenario.

Consequently, the victory of the government forces and the return of the Houthis to pre-July 2020 regions will force the Houthis to continue the war of depletion. But this option will determine the path of the group's future at the political and military levels and make the ambitions of the legitimate government and its supporters jump to higher levels.

**The second scenario:** The open war may push the two parties to reach an agreement between the Houthis and the Yemeni government, whereby the Houthis will stop waging the war in exchange for achieving part of their list of nine desires, which Mahdi Al-Mashat, head of the Houthis Political Council in Sana'a, announced that the group's leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi submitted to Griffiths to stop the war in Marib.<sup>[57]</sup> The Houthis' list of desires<sup>[58]</sup> include sharing the revenues of the governorate, supplying the capital with electricity, providing gas to Houthi areas at low prices, giving tribes and families loyal to the Houthis from Marib a share of leadership positions in local authority and in the executive and economic institutions, and the release of Houthi commanders, who were captured in battles with the army.

This scenario is unlikely to happen as it will make the Yemeni government subjugate to the Houthis and their constant threat. Implementing the Houthi's "wish list" in exchange for stopping the war on Marib will not be acceptable to the local authority and the tribes of the governorate.<sup>[59]</sup>

**The third scenario:** the fall of the city of Marib in the hands of the Houthis. This victory for the Houthis will open the door for the militia to head east towards the governorates of Hadramawt and Mahrah, and south towards Shabwa. The other governorates will fall into the hands of the armed group frequently. The group will also have the initiative to move on towards the west coast to reinforce its presence at Bab al-Mandab strait.

Despite this scenario is difficult, especially in the current period according to the military and societal data, the Houthis' insistence on mobilizing intensely and security intelligence about the entry of dozens of foreign trainers and experts <sup>[60]</sup> at this time, will make the war more complicated. In the event that the Houthis control the last center of the tribes and the state, the conflict in Yemen will enter a new phase, and the human losses will be enormous, and it may complicate any efforts to achieve an agreement between the two parties. Accordingly, the Saudis and Emiratis will lose their influence in Yemen.

The proposed scenarios are related to confrontations between the Houthis and the government forces, supported by tribal resistance and the coalition forces, but this does not mean that there is no a different scenario or a combination of scenarios, especially since the interests of the coalition (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) sometimes clash with the interests of Yemenis in different sides. Saudi Arabia and Iran may find the situation in Yemen more difficult than they imagine, with expectations that new regional and international actors will get involved.

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- [1] Encouraging the dissolution of the state is not the way to solve Yemen's problems, ELHAM MANEA, March 21, 2012 <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/47588>
- [2] The Hashemites are families claiming their lineage to the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the "Houthi family" claiming to be one of those families. The idea of the Zaidi doctrine (which was prevalent in most of the governorates of North Yemen) is that the ruler of Yemen must be a child of those families and consider him a divine right for them to rule.
- [3] According to what a tribal sheikh in Al-Jawf spoke to a "researcher at the Abaad Center," indicating that the Al-Ma'atari tribe had recently joined the Thu Muhammad tribe.
- [4] Researchers on tribal affairs and tribal sheikhs point out that the "Ashraf / Hashemites" do not belong to the tribes but to immigrant families who have retained their lineage, and there are many of them who have integrated into society but kept the lineage only.
- [5] Schlumberger, 1992; Looking for Yemen 's hidden treasure.
- [6] Natural gas reserves reached 16.9 trillion cubic feet. The largest part of Yemen's gas reserves is concentrated in the Marib and Al-Jawf fields. You can see: The Republic of Yemen Petroleum Overview <https://www.slideshare.net/DrEngMohammedDarsi/drmohammeddarsiypov>  
Or Madbi Amran / Qishn Total Petroleum System of the Marib-Al Jawf / Shabwah, and Masila-Jeza Basins, Yemen <https://pubs.usgs.gov/bul/b2202-g/b2202-g.pdf>
- [7] Some researchers point out that: "The Shafi'i school represents 55%, while the Zaidi school represents 42%, and the remaining 3% is distributed among the rest of other sects, such as the Maliki and Ismaili schools, at the level of Yemen. Since the revolution of September 26, 1962, and the introduction of education, and after the introduction of political pluralism in 1990, the scene changed a lot and most of Yemen's population did not know anything about the sect.
- [8] Yemeni folklore has existed for centuries, and it is a poetry repeated by Yemenis without restrictions of rhyme, caked as songs or chants, and has well-known melodies. It was able to unite the tribes of Yemen for several centuries, and it is a call for war or peace, or to welcome the guests of the tribe. Yemeni poets, including Abdullah Al-Bardouni, call it "the art of Zawamil poetry," as it is one of the types of Yemeni folk literature.
- [9] Statements by Houthi leaders confirm this, canceling official holidays celebrating the September 26 revolution against the imamate, and declaring the establishment of the republic in their areas of control.
- [10] <https://abaadstudies.org/news-59832.html>

[11] Al-Mutrahieh The tribe is a large gathering of tribesmen in preparation for fighting, confrontation and consultation.

[12] You can see their regions above

[13] In January 2017, Abdul-Raouf al-Dhahab was killed by an American aircraft in the "Yakla" area, while he was establishing an entity for the Yemeni army in that region. The Americans claimed that the operation was to kill "Qasim al-Raimi," the leader of the organization. Other sheikhs from a family other than al-Dhahab, such as "Abu Wafi Muhammad al-Surima" appeared to lead the tribe, but he was later killed by a suicide bombing claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS).

[14] The Al Awad tribe has a "legacy" in supporting the Republic of Yemen after 1962, and its leader, Sheikh Ahmed Abd Rabbo Al-Awadi, participated in permanent revolutions against the rule of the imams, and he had a prominent role in ending the siege on the capital, Sana'a, for seventy days.

[15] A tribal sheikh in the region spoke to Abaad researcher days after the defeat of "Yasser Al-Awadi" and his departure from the tribal areas.

[16] The Houthis are preparing to replace the tribal leaders of the "Sanaa Ring" <https://www.yemenmonitor.com/Details/ArtMID/908/ArticleID/18669>

[17] Rassam: The tribes will start implementing social isolation on traitors and agents (March 2016) <http://althawrah.ye/archives/383067>

[18] The Leader of the Revolution: The Tribal Honor Document aims to fortify the Home Front (March 2019) [http://www.cfca-ye.com/news\\_details.php?sid=2340](http://www.cfca-ye.com/news_details.php?sid=2340)

[19] Launching the executive procedures for the tribal honor document <https://www.ansarollah.com/archives/227285>

[20] The interview of Deifullah Rassam in March 2020 with the Houthi Al-Lahzah TV, (17 September 2020) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is6kbTVKkxA&ab\\_channel=%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B8%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9ALLAHTHAH](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Is6kbTVKkxA&ab_channel=%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B8%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B6%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9ALLAHTHAH)

[21] The "Afar" port is the entry point to the Houthi regions from the eastern and southern governorates. It was created by the Houthis as a new point for taxes collection, where taxes and customs are imposed on goods that want to reach areas of the Houthis control.

[22] A local official in the governorate spoke to "Abaad".

[23] As Yemen Crumbles, One Town Is an Island of Relative Calm By /Ben Hubbard /Nov. 9, 2017

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/world/middleeast/yemen-marib-war-ice-cream.html?smid=tw-share>

[24] The Houthis have previously tried several times to reach the city of Marib from the direction of Serwah district, where they maintain a presence in the west, but their operations have failed. The group believes that it has some luck with their control of the city of Al-Hazm in Al-Jawf, and the Qaniya district of Al-Bayda governorate.

[25] A sheikh in a village in the Mahliya district spoke to a researcher at the Abaad Center on October 1, 2020.

[26] A military official in Marib spoke to a researcher at the Abaad Center, and he mentioned tribes in Al-Jawf, Al-Jadaan and Medghal in Marib and Al-Bayda governorate.

[27] A military official in Al-Bayda, Ali Dara, spoke with details to a researcher at the Abaad Center on October 1, 2020

[28] <https://www.almashhad-alyemeni.com/14602>

[29] Announcing the "Sheba" region and selecting Major General "Al-Arada" as its president

<https://shabwaah-press.info/news/37984>

[30] [https://ar.farsnews.ir/middle\\_east/news/13990615001205](https://ar.farsnews.ir/middle_east/news/13990615001205)

[31] <https://www.irna.ir/news/84026346/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%82-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%84-%DB%8C%D9%85%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AF-%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%A8>

[32] Yemeni security services provide details of a Houthi cell in Marib

<https://www.yemenmonitor.com/Details/ArtMID/908/ArticleID/39062>

[33] The sheikhs and wise men of Yemen discuss the urgent developments at the local and international levels

<https://www.almasirah.net/post/162495>

[34] Security forces in Marib impose control over al-Ashraf and dozens of prisoners are in their grasp .. Details ..Urgent[https://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?sid=152912](https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=152912)

[35] Radaa tribes fail the militants expansion in the city and confront their attempts to control government installations and facilities [https://marebpress.net/news\\_details.php?sid=39798&lng=arabic](https://marebpress.net/news_details.php?sid=39798&lng=arabic)

[36] Yemen: The government confirms the killing of a prominent leader in al-Qaeda, Tariq al-Dhahab [https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2012/02/120216\\_yemen\\_dhahab\\_deaths](https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2012/02/120216_yemen_dhahab_deaths)

[37] For al-Qaeda 'in 2013: From the mountains of Yemen to the heart of Sana'a A9-% D9% 81% D9% 8A-2013-% D9% 85% D9% 86-% D8% AC% D8% A8% D8% A7% D9% 84-% D8% A7% D9% 84% D9% 8A% D9% 85% D9% 86-% D8% A5% D9% 84% D9% 89-% D9% 82% D9% 84% D8% A8-% D8% B5% D9% 86% D8% B9% D8 % A7 / comment-page-1 /

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[39] <https://abaadstudies.org/pdf-44.pdf>

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[40] Mujahid al-Salali is a journalist, a member of the Qayfa tribes, and familiar with the movements of armed groups in Radaa <https://alasihonline.com/local/11230#.X2IIRWjXLIU>

[41] Murad tribes issue an important statement and threaten to withdraw their sons from the fronts ... (Text of the statement) <https://adennews.net/story/104262>

[42] A statement by a tribal sheikh to an International Crisis Group's researcher, who visited the Marib governorate and the Juba region and met the sheikh there <https://www.crisisgroup.org/ar/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/behind-front-lines-yemens-marib>

[43] He spoke to a "researcher at the Abaad Center" in the Ma'rib governorate in May 2019 on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

[44] Three tribal leaders spoke to a "researcher at the Abaad Center" on July 19, 2020, as they prepared to fight the Houthis in the south and west of the country.

[45] This project was supposed to pump four billion dollars annually into the government's treasury, but it stopped with the outbreak of the war in 2015

[46] An oil ship named (SYRA) was slightly damaged after the explosion of a marine mine with 600,000 barrels of crude oil on board, according to some press sources, it was destined for Asian markets.

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[48] The Battle of Marib: A Turning Point in the Yemeni War - article published by the Carnegie <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/81654>

[49] The joint forces are led by Tariq Saleh, the nephew of former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who switched his alliance with the Houthis to alliance with the Saudi-led Arab coalition after the Houthis killed his uncle in December 2017. These forces are not subject to the Yemeni General Staff. It includes several factions: the Republic's Guards, the Giants' Forces, and the Tehami Resistance Brigades, and it receives direct support from the Emirates.

[50] Yemeni officials say clashes continue in Hodeida, 52 killed <https://apnews.com/article/yemen-sanaa-55b030b3bfc753aeb8dbda54215cedac>

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[51] Houthis Release Their Wish List for Ending the Yemen War <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/houthis-release-their-wish-list-for-ending-the-yemen-war>

[52] Yemeni Parliament demands Hadi to return to Aden

<https://arabi21.com/story/1255852/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%86>

Members of the Shura Council demand the return of the president and the government and the abolition of the Hodeidah agreement

[https://akhbaralyom-ye.net/news\\_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=125785](https://akhbaralyom-ye.net/news_details.php?lng=arabic&sid=125785)

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[54] The government's last stronghold battles in northern Yemen threaten the displaced with a new escape <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/afp/https://www.swissinfo.ch/ara/afp/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%83-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%82%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF/46057034>

AF/46057034

[55] Preventing a Deadly Showdown in Northern Yemen <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/yemen/b74-preventing-deadly-showdown-northern-yemen>

[56] Monitoring Unit at the Abaad Center for Studies and Research

[57] Sana'a presents an initiative on Marib in nine points to Griffiths <https://www.alayyam.info/news/8CG3LDHW-BGUO31-E4CE>

[58] The initiative was not published in the group's media, and some of its articles were obtained through informed sources in Sana'a, and no independent source or the United Nations has verified its truth.

[59] A local official spoke to a “researcher at the Abaad Center” on September 23, 2020 after he was presented with the aforementioned points, and said that the Houthis’ presentation of such points is an insult to “Marib and the tribes,” as it is an insult to the legitimate government. He said the Houthis’ attempts failed during three months of the attack on the province.

[60] A security source spoke to the Abaad Researcher, September 2020



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[info@abaadstudies.org](mailto:info@abaadstudies.org)

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