

No Going Back: The UAE's Strategic Move in Hodeidah Should Bring to a Close the First Phase of Yemen's War

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Despite significant logistical and diplomatic challenges, liberating the port is vital to providing more humanitarian relief and meeting coalition war aims.

This week saw the beginning of the final battle to liberate Hodeidah, Yemen's largest port. A city of 700,000 people, Hodeidah is the "mouth" of Yemen, importing 47 per cent of the country's food in the first quarter of 2018 according to the Yemen Comprehensive Humanitarian Operation (YCHO) Support Center. Hodeidah is also the main source of income for the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, who charge shippers around \$100,000 to allow each ship to berth and offload food or fuel.

The [eyes of the world are now drawn to Hodeidah](#), even though most people had never heard of it before this week. The people of Hodeidah want to be liberated from the Houthis, who are not from the area, yet locals fear a long and destructive battle. Diplomatic efforts to persuade the Houthis to voluntarily leave the port appear to have failed. With UAE-backed Yemeni forces eight kilometres outside Hodeidah, the looming battle has caused commercial shippers to stop delivering food to the city, although aid agencies continue their deliveries. The clock is now ticking. If food imports through the port are reduced for an extended period, Houthi-controlled Yemen may slip into the devastating famine that the UN and other aid agencies are warning of.

In the eyes of the world, the Saudi-led coalition has chosen to take Hodeidah's port "off line" for a period, a tremendously risky play. The UAE is most directly responsible for the success of the Hodeidah campaign and the restoration of humanitarian flows through Hodeidah and Saleef, another nearby port.

The UAE has a lot of "skin in the game." Nearly 1,500 UAE troops and mainly UAE airpower and artillery support the 25,000-strong Yemeni force moving to liberate the port. On June 13, four UAE troops were killed in a Houthi strike on a naval vessel.

What most observers fail to understand, after just tuning in to Hodeidah, is that the UAE and its Yemeni partners have been [preparing to liberate the port since 2016](#) in order to weaken the Houthis, create leverage for negotiators, limit the rebels' ability to import Iranian-provided arms, and bring the port back up to full capacity as a humanitarian import hub. Unfortunately, Hodeidah's liberation was prevented by successive protests from the United States, the UN, and aid agencies, leaving northern Yemen to languish with insufficient food. While the operation was primarily an amphibious invasion, the US assistance was needed to protect against anti-shipping missiles, mines, and drone boats. Now, as the forces drive up to Hodeidah from the south, US support is no longer essential. The operation has finally gone forward.

Liberating Hodeidah and nearby ports is within the military capabilities of the UAE-backed Yemeni forces. There are around 2,000 Houthi fighters in the city, surrounded by up to 700,000 locals and 25,000 advancing Yemeni forces.

Internal opposition to the Houthis is strong, especially since they murdered Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh in December 2017. The UAE has had over two years to plan and prepare for this moment.

The battle can have only one result: the liberation of Hodeidah and its people. Uncertainty is instead focused on the speed of the battle, whether ports and maritime channels will be booby-trapped or otherwise damaged, and whether the coalition's humanitarian relief plans are good enough to save Yemen from famine. This is a major international test, but any doubters should remember that the UAE armed forces have surprised the world time and again, liberating Aden and Mukalla in operations the US and other world powers said couldn't be done.

Yet, in the case of Hodeidah, recapturing the ports militarily is not the end of the story. Having initiated this operation, the UAE must now show that it is up to the [challenge of restoring food and fuel imports](#) to a level greater than they were before the battle.

More than two years of thinking have gone into how to capture the port intact, get its facilities up and running, and pour aid into Hodeidah. One key challenge of restarting the port will be clearing undersea mines and booby-traps placed on port facilities. A second will be convincing commercial shippers to return to the port even as occasional Houthi rockets are being fired from distant launchpads inland. There is still a large area of Houthi-controlled Red Sea

coast between Hodeidah and the Saudi Arabian border crossing at Al-Tuwal, preventing large Saudi ports like Jizan from being used to make up for any shortfall if Hodeidah and Saleef are temporarily unable to operate.

As a result more still needs be done to meet the challenges in Hodeidah. The post-liberation anti-explosive clearance of the port and shipping channels must be expeditious. Cranes, silos, and fuel tanks must be replaced or fixed immediately. Port operations personnel and dock workers must be rushed into Hodeidah and Saleef to supplement local staff.

The coalition must support commercial shippers by insuring—or even leasing—their vessels to incentivise them to return to the Red Sea ports. (This is the kind of bold move the UAE is famed for; much as the Emirates went out and immediately bought its own amphibious landing ship after the US refused to loan it one in 2015.)

And all of this [needs to be shown to the world](#)—not just in slick news coverage but in detailed daily multi-language briefings of humanitarian plans, akin to the kind of press conferences the US or UK militaries would provide. The coalition also needs to show that the liberation of Hodeidah has created a new opening for a ceasefire and dialogue between the disparate factions. The new UN special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, has had a baptism of fire, trying to balance the needs of the Houthis and the UAE-backed Yemeni forces in Hodeidah at the same time that he was [trying to get all parties back to the negotiating table](#).

After Hodeidah is liberated, the coalition needs to be realistic: the loss of Hodeidah will reduce the amount of money the Houthis can make, but they will still tax incoming food and fuel wherever it crosses their lines. The loss of Hodeidah, well outside the Houthis' home provinces of Saada and Amran, will not break their will to fight for Sanaa, the capital.

Instead, the strategic fruit of Hodeidah should be that it brings to a close the first, and hopefully last, phase of the Yemen war. Hodeidah is the last of the major cities held by the Houthis outside Yemen's mountainous highlands, which they will defend much more fiercely.

The liberation of Hodeidah, Saleef, and the whole Red Sea coast should give Saudi Arabia and the UAE a great deal of reassurance that the Houthis can no longer smuggle in large numbers of missiles capable of hitting Riyadh or elsewhere, and that they cannot become a new "southern Hezbollah," akin to the Iranian proxy in Lebanon.

These factors point to the need to fully commit to the UN peace process after the liberation of Hodeidah and Saleef.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, has traveled to most of Yemen's battlefronts during three trips this year. This article was originally published [on the National website](#).