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## Houthi posturing, not mere retaliation Fernando Carvajal

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# Houthi posturing, not mere retaliation

## Fernando Carvajal

### *Introduction*

Houthi rebels aim at disrupting relations between their rivals in Yemen and Coalition members in efforts to deflect from major defeats in Mareb and Shebwa. Since July 2019, Houthi drone and missile operations have targeted Saudi Arabia, primary patron to the Internationally Recognized Government of Yemen, but as new momentum shifts to southern forces allied with the Southern Transitional Council (STC), an ally of the UAE, Houthis now aim to punish the Emirates and force change in that relationship. All the while balancing relations with Iran, their primary weapons supplier.

### *Shifting momentum*

Recent escalation by Houthis threaten to derail progress in regional talks, which are seen by the Sana'a-based rebels as direct obstruction of their own plans to force peace talks on favorable terms. Attacks on Abu Dhabi since [17 January 2022](#) have been portrayed by the Sana'a-based Houthi rebels as a response to escalation by the Saudi Arabia-led Coalition, but a more

nuanced view identifies the aims of a wider, coordinated strategy.

The shifts across battlefields in [Mareb and Shebwa](#) have caught Houthis by surprise. After Houthis captured southern Mareb from troops loyal to president Abdo Rabbo Mansour [Hadi](#)'s Internationally Recognized Government (IRG), and the western mountains of Shebwa, troops aligned with the Southern Transitional Council (STC) deployed from the [West Coast](#) along the Red Sea to replace demoralized government troop. The move by the pro-STC [Giants Brigades](#) against Houthis came only after president Hadi replaced pro-Islah governor of Shebwa [Mohammed bin Adio](#) with STC ally Ahmed Mohammed al-Awadh. The move primarily aimed at removing obstacles to the implementation of the [Riyadh Agreement](#) of November 2019.

[Deployment](#) by the Giants Brigade came at a moment of increasing unpredictability for Houthis weeks following the death of Tehran's ambassador in Sana'a, [Hassan Irloo](#), and reports of new rounds of talks between Iran and the US, with growing prospects for an [Iran-UAE](#) rapprochement.

### *Timeline of new escalation*

01/01/2022	Saudi Arabia announce <a href="#">Operation South Tornado</a>
04/01/2022	Houthis claim capture of UAE-flagged ship Rawabi near <a href="#">Hodeida</a>
10/01/2022	Giants Brigade take Houthi held <a href="#">al-Ain</a> District in Shebwa
11/01/2022	Giants Brigade enter Houthi held territory in <a href="#">southern Mareb</a>
12/01/2022	"Iraqi muqawama threaten to attack the <a href="#">UAE</a> "

17/01/2022	Houthis claim coordinated drone, missile strike on <a href="#">Abu Dhabi</a>
	UAE call for the US Administration to list Houthi rebels as Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTC)
24/01/2022	Houthis claim a second strike on <a href="#">Abu Dhabi</a>
25/01/2022	Houthi media launch social media <a href="#">campaign</a> against UAE: “#UAE_is_not_safe”
	Houthi spokesman, Mohammed Abd al-Salam, warns UAE from <a href="#">Muscat</a>
30/01/2022	Houthis claim a third strike on <a href="#">Abu Dhabi</a>
02/02/2022	Iraqi group ‘Brigades of <a href="#">Waad al-Haq</a> ’ claim strike on <a href="#">Abu Dhabi</a>
03/02/2022	UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs speaks via telephone with <a href="#">Iran</a> counterpart
	Iraq’s <a href="#">Muqtada al-Sadr</a> “condemns Iraqi militia attack on 'a Gulf state' [ie the UAE] over normalisation with #Israel or due to its involvement in the #Yemen war”

### *Unpredictable shift*

Regional dynamics are shifting as Houthis aim to strengthen their position for peace talks. Since December 2017, Houthi primary aim has been to force direct talks with Saudi Arabia, seen as a guarantee of long-term permanence as a center of power in the region, not just in Yemen. Consequently, this demand by Houthis weakens the position of president Hadi and other Yemeni political actors.

The rebel group led by [Abd al-Malek Badr al-Din al-Houthi](#), and his uncle Abd al-Kareem Amir al-Din al-Houthi (Minister of Interior), took the capital Sana’a in a brazen coup d’état in [September 2014](#). Houthi militia were able to over-run government troops from Sa’dah to [Amran](#) and into Sana’a with minimal effort. Houthi forces drove straight to homes of leaders of al-Islah party and members of Hadi’s Cabinet, as well as the base camp for the First Armored Division (al-Firqa), then led by current Vice President Ali Muhsin al-Ahmar, who [fled](#) to Saudi Arabia on 22

September 2014. In March 2015, Houthis called on allies in provinces like Aden, Abyan, Lahj and Shebwa to secure control over areas advocating [secession](#), while president Hadi called for the military and tribal allies to counter Houthis. Hadi also called upon the Arab League for intervention, leading to gathering of the Saudi Arabia-led Coalition to [Restore Legitimacy](#) and adoption of UN Security Council [Resolution 2216](#) in April 2015.

From the beginning of Operation [Decisive Storm](#), the UAE had been instrumental in expelling Houthi forces from southern provinces. Just as with other members of the Coalition, Houthis listed the UAE as a legitimate target, often striking the base camp in [Aden](#) and then escalating with the first drone strike against Abu Dhabi in [July 2018](#). Prior to gaining long range drone capabilities, Houthis focused on targets along southern [Saudi Arabia](#) or Coalition bases in [Mareb](#), but new capabilities deployed by Houthis since [November 2017](#) have provided the rebels the ability to shape battles with a reach beyond Yemeni

territory, specifically targeting regional neighbors providing financial and material support for their Yemeni rivals.

In the summer of 2019, the [UAE withdrew](#) nearly all troops from southern Yemen amid growing tensions with the internationally recognized government. In the period since the troop withdrawal, Houthis managed to seize massive amount of territory in al-Baydha, al-Jawf, Mareb and Shebwa provinces. Saudi Arabia then spent nearly two years negotiating an [agreement](#) between the IRG and the STC in order to better coordinate forces to reverse Houthi gains across battle fronts.

### *Regional dynamics and Houthi posturing*

Most observers agree Houthis have missed a number of opportunities to solidify their position as a major center of power in Yemen, surely as a consequence of balancing relations with Iran. Increasing dependence on Iran, particularly in the military sphere, remains a major challenge for Houthis, but they will continue to resist being an [Iranian](#) pawn. This balancing act is where Houthis risk losing major leverage in the coming months.

Houthis remain highly preoccupied with maintaining credible military capabilities to threaten neighboring Gulf States more so than the ability to fight demoralized and fractured forces of the IRG. The deeply fragmented government of president Hadi poses no real military or political threat to Houthis, to this moment. The main challenge for Houthis comes from talks between [Gulf neighbors and Iran](#), as well as Tehran's demands for a seat at the table among

the [Yemen Quad](#). This amount of discussion on the Yemen file and a grand solution, without Houthi representation, poses a major threat to the Sana'a-based rebels who want to shape their own relations with neighbors like Saudi Arabia and dictate their own role in Yemen's future political environment. Houthis do not want Tehran negotiating terms of any peace agreement, but they also recognize that without Iranian military assistance, they will lose all capability to strike inside Saudi or UAE territory.

Houthi drone and missile strikes beyond Yemen's borders are meant to convey an image of sovereignty, more than a mere extension of Iranian threat to Gulf States. Time will tell whether Houthis are willing to ditch relations with Tehran in order to achieve majority of their goals first, or if Iran will sacrifice Houthis for their economic and security prosperity.

### *Conclusion*

While Houthis face increasing unpredictability across battlefronts and on the diplomatic track, the government of the UAE must confront the cost of leading from behind. Southern forces supported by the UAE can potentially shift the momentum on the ground along battle fronts in the West Coast and provinces like Abyan, al-Baydha and Mareb while holding on to Shebwa. This will require diplomatic and material support in order to sustain gains against Houthis. The strongest challenge will come from UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that will pressure the Giants Brigades and the STC to de-escalate in order to prevent

risks to civilians is said provinces, much like they did in June and November 2018 leading to talks in Stockholm. Parties must learn the lessons from 2018 and avoid giving Houthis and opportunity to regroup and once again renege on another agreement.

Support for the Giants Brigade and the STC may increase threats to UAE territory in the short-term, which could only be mediated through leveraging talks with Tehran, forcing a Houthi return to negotiations under the auspices of the UN Special Envoy. This process could open an opportunity for Abu Dhabi to host preliminary talks among parties such as Hadi's government, the STC, Houthis and Tehran as an observer.

#### **About the author:**

Fernando Carvajal (twitter: @CarvajalF) served on the UN Panel of Experts on Yemen (2017 – 2019) as Armed Groups and Regional Expert. He is president of The Carvajal Group, LLC consulting firm and currently serves as Director of Research at South24 Center for News and Studies.

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