

The events of Shabwa: Restoring the status of the Popular Resistance

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Position Evaluation



We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

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The city of Ataq, which is the administrative center of the Shabwa Governorate, witnessed violent clashes between the military units of the Ataq axis and the Special Security Forces on one hand, and the so-called Shabwa Protection Forces and the “Giant Brigades” forces, on the other hand.

The battles lasted for three days, because of the intervention of drones (likely belonging to the United Arab Emirates), where the security forces and the national army were forced to withdraw from the city, this calls for several questions: Why did these battles erupt? And what determined their path? What are the most important repercussions they left on the Yemeni scene and their main issues?

General background:

Shabwa Governorate is in the middle of the southern part of the Republic of Yemen, and it is connected to the governorates of Hadhramaut and Ma’rib from the north, Hadhramaut governorate to the east, the Arabian Sea

and part of Abyan governorate to the south, and the governorates of Abyan, Al Bayda and Ma’rib to the west⁽¹⁾, as shown by the following map.



Shabwa Governorate has an important geographical location and oil wealth, where the gas pipeline passes through it. In addition, it has the most important economic facility, the Balhaf gas liquefaction and export station.

Politically, it was affiliated with the “Abyan-Shabwa” axis within the context of the dual geopolitical polarization in southern Yemen, in a confrontation with the Al-Dhalea-Yaf’a axis. As Unitarism is rooted in the Shabwa Governorate, it is seen as a safety valve for the unity of Yemen, where there are no Southern movement factions in it – including the STC.

Shabwa Governorate played a major role in changing the course of the battles that erupted in 2019, between the forces affiliated with legitimacy and the military forces of the STC, backed by the UAE. Those forces (associated with STC) suffered a military setback in the Shabwa Governorate after they had been able to control Aden and Abyan. Accordingly, the National Army forces gained back the upper hand and marched toward Abyan, reaching the borders of the city of Aden, before the intervention of the UAE drones, which held some airstrikes, on the 29th and 30th of August 2019, forcing them to withdraw to the Shaqra area in Abyan Governorate.



Since then, the Shabwa Governorate has been free of any forces affiliated with the STC, except for forces associated with UAE that control the strategic port of Balhaf and the Al-Alam camp northeast of Ataq (40 km away from Ataq). The National Army forces located in the Shaqra area in the Abyan Governorate were advanced defense forces affiliated with the governorate, against the military forces of the STC.

An example of development and security:

Shabwa Governorate, under the leadership of its governor, Muhammad Saleh bin Adyo, was able to present a distinctive model in development, provision of services and building security and military capabilities, which ensured a great deal of stability and presence of the state. This situation irritated the STC and the UAE, especially after Ben Adyo publicly pressured the UAE to hand over the strategic Balhaf port, allowing gas to be exported from it. He objected to the transformation of the gas facility in Balhaf into a military base that prevents its operation⁽²⁾ and threatened to storm it with Yemeni forces. The matter required the intervention of a Saudi mediation committee, and the UAE had to request a period of two to three months to withdraw its forces⁽³⁾.



It seems that this made the Shabwa Governorate within the targeting circle, as three directorates, including the Bayhan district, fell into the hands of the Houthis, where in September 2021, the “Arab Alliance” refused to provide support to the National Army forces in the Shabwa Governorate, preventing them from achieving a victory. Instead, the Arab Alliance withdrew the Giant Brigade from the western coast and other areas, directing some of these forces to Shabwa Governorate to take charge of liberating those directorates, enabling them to have a permanent presence in the province.

In the same context, the UAE asked Awad bin Al-Wazir Al-Awlaki, one of the most prominent sheiks of the Al-Awlaq⁽⁴⁾ tribe (the largest tribe in Shabwa), to return to Shabwa, where he had spent 12 years in the city of Abu Dhabi, fearing tribal revenge. During November and December 2021, Awad bin al-Wazir was directed to lead an armed tribal demonstration, calling for the rectification, of what they described as a structural imbalance of the local authority in the governorate.



While the Yemenis were following the Governorate's experience in development and stability, President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi was subjected to great pressure from the UAE to change the governor, Ben Udayo. Leaks about his change provoked angry reactions, which resulted in what looked like a rally rejecting his change. On the 24th of December 2021, a large demonstration took place in Ataq, calling on President Hadi not to submit to pressures from the coalition countries. However, Hadi submitted, and, on the 25th of December 2021, he issued a decree appointing Awad bin Al-Wazir Al-Awlaki as governor of the Shabwa Governorate.

Tension followed by fighting:

Ibn al-Wazir came to the leadership of the Shabwa Governorate with an Emirati agenda, and it is only natural for him to be in dispute with the security system in the governorate, led by Brigadier General Abd Rabbo Lkaab, who is accepted among the tribesmen and the local community.

Weeks before the fighting, the Shabwa Governorate witnessed military tensions, due to the insistence of the governor, Ibn al-Wazir to bring in armed forces from outside the governorate. The situation became more tense, after an ambush set up by the Shabwa Defense Forces, (which are forces that entered Shabwa in 2021 and are affiliated with the STC), in which they targeted the convoy of the Special Forces Commander, Lak-ab, on the 19th of July 2022, who survived.



The governor tried to dismiss Lakab, but he refused, as he considered his dismissal to be illegal; this was supported by the directive of the Minister of Interior, who said that the governor had no right to dismiss the commander of the Special Forces. After that, the PLC assigned a commission to investigate the matter, however, the PLC issued a decree to dismiss Lakab from his position before the committee in charge submitted its report.

At that time, the Shabwa Defense Forces and the Giant Brigades imposed a siege on the house of the Special Forces Commander, Lakab, on the 6th of August, according to the governor's orders, which escalated the tensions in the city of Ataq.

The situation exploded after the killing of the commander of the Rapid Intervention Forces, affiliated with the Ataq axis, Major Ahmed Abd Rabbo Lashqum Al-Barassi, by the Shabwa Defense Forces, on the early morning of the 8th of August. Later on, the city witnessed three days of vicious battles between forces associated with the legitimacy (the special forces) and forces associated with the STC.

During the first day of the confrontations, neither party achieved significant progress on the ground, but the Special Security Forces, the patrol police forces and the National Army forces launched an attack on the second day and took control of most of the camps and sites. They came close to taking control of the airport, which is the last military base for the Giants Brigades forces and the so-called Shabwa Defense⁽⁵⁾. However, things went differently, as the Giant Brigades pushed with additional reinforcements, and the UAE drones launched raids on the forces of the National Army, forcing them to withdraw outside the city of Ataq.

Factors that affected the course of the battle:

Several factors contributed to determining the course of the battle and enabling the UAE-backed forces to take control of the city of Ataq, including:

1. The difference in capabilities:

The forces affiliated with the National Army have very limited capabilities, compared to the forces loyal to the UAE, both in terms of human strength and armament and material capabilities. The gap between the two sides widened greatly after the intervention of the drones in the confrontations, targeting the army's camps and the supplies coming to them. According to media sources, drones — believed to be associated with UAE — launched intensive raids that lasted four hours. As a result, the balance on the ground changed, and the Special Security Forces were forced to withdraw⁽⁶⁾.

2. Removing the cover of “legitimacy”:

This is the most serious shift in the battle. Although the appointed governor, Awad bin Al-Wazir Al-Awlaki, was the one who caused the events by his insistence on bringing in forces from outside the governorate, the head of the PLC, Dr. Rashad Al-Alimi, sided with the governor and showed the matter as a rebellion from the commander of the special forces.



This was clear in the statement he issued, which portrayed the Special Forces as being outside the authority of the state: “The unfortunate events that the city of Ataq witnessed gave an additional lesson in the importance of coming around the authority of the state, its right to monopolize power “Supporting the symbol and the sovereignty of the state, represented by the local authority, and its leadership, to stop the blood-shedding and to enforce the will of the state”(7).

The same position emerged from the newly appointed Minister of Defense, Mohsen Al-Daeri, who said: “The military operation was a must for those who rebel against the decisions,” referring to the commander of the Special Security Forces and the forces loyal to him⁽⁸⁾.

This approach enabled the supporters of the STC to use a serious weapon, which is accusing the National Army forces in the Shabwa Governorate of being rebellious and out of the law, by forces that were never part of the military or national security structures.

3. The intervention of the Giant Brigades forces and the UAE drones:

As we mentioned, the intervention of the Giant Brigades, with its large military capabilities, along with the forces of the “Shabwa Protection”, and the heavy interference of the UAE drones, led to a change in the course of the war and forced the Special Forces and “Ataq Axis Brigades” to withdraw from their positions, outside the city of Ataq, even though it was close to ending the battle.

4. Saudi Arabia's position:

It appears to the observer that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia gave the green light to this military operation, as it is difficult for these events to occur without the consent of (Riyadh). If the matter was otherwise, Saudi Arabia would have intervened quickly to stop the battles. Instead, it treated the matter as a conflict between competing Yemeni parties and that the Yemenis should resolve their differences!

Possible repercussions:

The developments of events in Shabwa will leave many repercussions on the Yemeni scene, including:

- Adjusting the military balance in favor of the separatist forces:

The battles in Shabwa ended in a shift of the balance of power in favor of the separatist forces, especially the STC. The forces supporting the secession were able to impose their control over a governorate that enjoys a very important geographical location and has high economic capabilities compared to the rest of the governorates. Although this transformation will be occasional since the social structure and the general orientation in the governorate support Yemen's Unity and oppose separatist forces, this does not diminish the fact that the army and national forces lost large areas of a pivotal governorate.

- Paving the way for spreading chaos in the eastern provinces:

The eastern provinces remained — to some extent — protected from the chaos spread by the STC and its military forces. However, developments in Shabwa will likely expose these governorates to chaos and possible conflicts.

The media campaigns of the STC and the UAE have tended to talk about Sayun, the First Military District and the Mahra Governorate. Unless the rebellion of these parties is curbed, it is expected to transfer chaos and instability to those provinces. Moreover, Ma'rib Governorate will not be far from the repercussions of what happened. It was also the target of media campaigns aimed at demonizing the local authority, the army and the national forces opposing the Houthis.

- Putting the future of the Presidential Leadership Council on the line:

The battles of Shabwa dispelled the consensual atmosphere that accompanied the formation of the PLC, putting it and the stage it leads to the test, with the chairman of the PLC being biased toward the military component associated with illegal projects. Meanwhile, splits occurred within the PLC with the gradual acceptance —perhaps sub-



mission — of Al-Alimi to the chairman of the STC, Aidarous Al-Zubaidi, all in light of the disappointment from the position of some members of the government, especially the Minister of Defense, who was recently appointed to succeed Muhammad al-Maqdashi.

These positions were reflected in angry reactions by a wide range of Yemenis, and several national figures — including the former Minister of Interior, Ahmed Al-Maysari, and the Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Abdulaziz Jubbari — demanding for the National Forces to search for other options, including activating the option of popular resistance and forming a national salvation bloc.

- Preparing to reach a political settlement with the Houthis

One of the motives behind the military developments in Shabwa is likely to create the conditions to impose a political settlement with the Houthis, which would be handing over the country to them. Since it will not be possible to pass this deal while the Islah Party maintains its political and popular strength, it must be weakened or even excluded, especially since the Islah Party is the strategic equivalent of the Houthis.

This step (by which we mean the weakening of the Islah Party) comes as a completion of a previous procedure, which was the removal of President Hadi and his deputy, Lieutenant General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, from the political scene. The regional and international forces concerned with Yemen perceive the difficulty of imposing a political settlement between the Yemeni parties and the Houthis if these two figures remain at the top of the legitimate authority and the strength and presence of the Islah Party.

For this reason, the Shabwa events were the starting point of a wide campaign aimed at demonizing the Islah Party, in preparation for its weakening, and perhaps its exclusion, so that the road would be clear for a biased political settlement of the Houthis, imposed by regional and international powers.

Therefore, it was not surprising that the U.S. envoy to Yemen, after the events of Shabwa, said: “The conflict in Yemen is now in the middle of the road toward a solution. ... I wouldn’t have said that six months ago. We have a chance to change the course of the conflict, and this is the time to do it.” Moreover, he declared his country’s willingness to cooperate with Russia and China to reach a political solution in Yemen, describing it to be in “midway”⁽⁹⁾.

- Restoring the Status of the popular resistance:

The popular resistance was formed after the Houthis coup, their control of power in Sana’a and several provinces, the siding of part of the army (loyal to President Saleh) to the Houthis and the collapse of the rest of the army.



The popular resistance has taken the responsibility of confronting the Houthis, militarily and popularly. In terms of its organization, a Supreme Council of Resistance was formed in Taiz Governorate, which was a starting point and the basic base for the popular resistance. At a later stage, popular resistance councils were formed in Sana’a, Dhamar, Ibb and several other governorates.

With the formation of the National Army, the viewpoint of the symbols of the popular resistance was based on the need for the resistance to remain equivalent and supportive of the National Army. In contrast, voices rose to express that there was no need for the Popular Resistance in the presence of the national army.

The military events in the Shabwa Governorate proved that the survival and the support of the popular resistance decision was the safest option, as the “legitimacy” was used as a cover to utilize strikes against the army and national security units, eliminating them in favor of military forces, which are tools for external parties, that carry an agenda opposing to the Yemen unity project. as The Popular Resistance option represents a path that has a wider range and is complementary to the national army at this critical stage, which is full of conspiracy against the army and national components.

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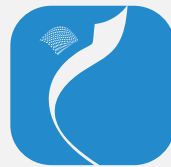
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