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## **The Saudi-Emirati Looming Rivalry on Hodeida: Port Geopolitics in the Red Sea**

On 12 June 2018, the Saudi-led coalition announced the beginning of the operation “Golden Victory” [*The Baghdad Post*, Operation ‘Golden Victory’: Yemeni forces at outskirts of Hodeidah airport”, 13 June 2018], with the aim to re-conquer Hodeida (700.000 inhabitants), the main port city of the Yemeni Red Sea coast, seized by the Huthis in 2015. This will likely be a turning-point in Yemen’s war, able to break a three-year old stalemate: the issue is not whether the coalition will succeed in securing this critical port, but rather how this will happen and who, between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, will manage to exert more influence, in the post-conflict, on Hodeida with infrastructural and commercial implications.

As was in Aden (2015), Mukalla (2016) and Mokha (2017), the UAE (with about 1.500 Special Forces of the Presidential Guard) are leading the ground offensive against the Huthis’ insurgents in Hodeida, as a result of better military capabilities with respect to the Saudis and (at this point) fighting experience on the Yemeni soil. Numbers are clear: 20.000/25.000 UAE-backed Yemeni forces (Tihama Resistance, Giants/Al-Amalaqah Brigade and Southern secessionists under the banner of the National Resistance Forces led by Tareq Mohammed Saleh, nephew of the former president) are fighting against 3.000/5.000 Huthis’ militants present in Hodeida and its neighbourhoods, many of them just recruited for the battle.

The port of Hodeida is really strategic: 80% of import and humanitarian aid enters through this infrastructure, which represents the main source of income for Huthis’ guerrilla (about \$14 million per year) and allows the Sa’da-based movement to link Northern highlands’ fiefdoms with the Red Sea. Moreover, the Saudi-led coalition denounces that Hodeida is the first gate of entrance for Iranian arms’ smuggling, as in the case of parts of missiles later assembled on the Yemeni territory (although the UN Panel of Experts 2018 downsizes this statement mainly indicating, instead, Eastern Yemen’s routes).

In Hodeida’s region, the UAE have been shaping a network of local forces and patronage, following the same pattern successfully applied in other port cities of Southern Yemen as Aden, Mukalla and Mokha:

in these big urban centres, the UAE have gained the upper hand in the management of port infrastructures. Southern coastal Yemen enters into the Emirati “string of ports strategy” [*The Economist*, “The ambitious United Arab Emirates”, 6 April 2017], aimed at projecting commercial and geopolitical power amidst the Horn of Africa, the Bab el Mandeb strait and the Indian Ocean.

But Hodeida is a different case, as it stands in the Saudi radius of influence, currently centred in the Red Sea waterway, where Saudi Arabia has been widely investing in non-oil, infrastructural projects as NEOM, King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) and the “Red Sea project” (for the development of tourism in small islands).

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have already demonstrated to pursue two parallel strategies in Southern Yemeni regions so far, i.e. united against the Huthis, but autonomous in carving out niches of influence: in Mahra (at the border with Oman) and in Socotra island, they vied for leverage. From a regional and military point of view, the Saudis and the Emiratis need one the other, thus they will likely find a balance for the management of the Hodeida port, in order to reduce rivalries. But the Hodeida case depicts the unstoppable strategic ambition of Abu Dhabi in the Middle East and beyond, and how this could potentially clash with Saudi interests.

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