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# Marib, Last Hope for Restoring the State in Yemen

by [Yasmin Al-Qadhi](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [Yasmin Al-Qadhi](#)

Yasmin Al-Qadhi is director of Marib Girls Foundation. She is a recipient of the International Women of Courage Award 2020. Yasmin is member of the Women Solidarity Network and is a recipient of the Peace Track Initiative Feminist Peace Fellowship. She is a 'Shabab in Focus' contributor.



Brief Analysis

## With clashes between Houthis and the Yemeni government forces escalating in Marib, the city's inhabitants will lose no matter who claims victory.

**H**eated armed conflict in the Marib governorate of Yemen has been ongoing between the Yemeni government's forces and those of the Houthi rebels since the beginning of this year. [Friday's](#) clashes in the district of Sirwah proved to be one of the worst, with tens of fighters killed on both sides. Ironically, the media of both the Houthis and Yemeni government have claimed Friday's battle as a win. All I know is that the people of my hometown of Marib are the ultimate losers. Despite the many lives lost in the battle fields and now the lives of Yemenis [claimed](#) by the novel coronavirus—along with the many thousands likely vulnerable to the endemic—the conflict of Yemen continues.

A few weeks ago, the United Nation's Secretary General Antonio Guterres [urged](#) Yemenis and international stakeholders to end hostilities and ramp up efforts to counter a potential outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though [both](#) the Yemeni government and Houthis welcomed his statements, and while the Saudi-led Arab Coalition supporting the Yemeni government announced a [unilateral immediate ceasefire](#) for two weeks, the fights between Yemenis did not stop—especially in my hometown of Marib. Amid the conflict, the first case of the virus in Marib was [reported](#) officially on Wednesday.

During the last few months, the Houthis have escalated their attacks on Marib, especially in the wake of the [assassination](#) of the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani by an air raid in Baghdad. The following day, Houthis went out in large [public protests](#), where they vowed that they would seek revenge for Soleimani's death. His death was significant as he is seen as their patron as well as the patron of other armed militias affiliated with Iran in Iraq, Syria,

and Lebanon.

In March, the UN Secretary General's envoy Martin Griffiths visited Marib in an attempt to stop the armed escalation there. Although his visit was no more than a few hours, I nevertheless consider this to be a historic visit. Griffiths' presence marked the first time a UN envoy visited Marib since the war started in 2014. Even so, this visit has not stopped the fighting. I was unable to attend the press conference the governor held with Griffiths as I was in the United States receiving the International **Women of Courage Award** given to peace activists from all around the world. While I was happy and grateful to receive the award, my mind was back home with my family and neighbors in Marib as the Houthis' ballistic missiles fell on them.

Griffiths' visit to Marib was to issue a **warning** of the dangers of "the military adventurism and quest for territorial gains." Yet he, as usual, did not dare name the Houthis in his message in an ongoing attempt to remain acceptable as a neutral mediator for peace. In Griffiths' public statements on the conflict, he tries not to point fingers or indicate the parties derailing the peace process. Though I understand his decision, so far this has not proven to be a useful strategy. Holding the aggressors accountable could create pressure on them to respect a ceasefire and allowing the peace process to move forward.

Instead, as expected, the Houthis have paid no attention to Griffiths' March warning, nor those of the UN secretary general, despite the lip service they have given in response to the pleas for peace. The residents of Marib have seen how, in reality, they have rallied their troops and have continued on from one battlefield to the next. Moreover, the militias have targeted the region's infrastructure by **targeting Marib's oil refinery**, causing the displacement of thousands of families.

One of the great tragedies of this recent escalation is that Marib has actually made notable strides during the conflict to develop into a stronger and more vibrant region than existed before. The dynamics of the conflict pushed Marib out of its previous status quo even as the region itself remained relatively safe and unaffected by the fighting. The current escalation is threatening to destroy the progress Marib has made even during the difficulties of the past half-decade.

Prior to the beginning of the conflict, the Marib governorate was characterized by a tribal nature and a wealth of natural resources. Even so, the governorate suffered from a severe exclusion of development projects. Marib was characterized by a lack of infrastructure and weak governmental services due to the corruption that characterized the former regime and led to a selective focus only on Sana'a as the country's capital. In Marib, the former regime used an approach of divide and rule by encouraging internal tribal fights in the governorate. This method allowed it to take advantage of the natural resources of the area without providing much in terms of development in return.

I lost four of my brothers in the tribal wars of Marib that took place under this system. Yet there existed a certain value system between the tribes: the various parties respected truces, protected women and children, and allowed peace mediation to progress. After the war started in 2014, Marib's relative stability and its strong local leadership drastically changed the governorate, allowing a once underdeveloped region to become prosperous.

Today, there are more paved roads in Marib than ever before, and basic services have **improved dramatically** as the local economy has flourished. These improvements happened due to the political decentralization that occurred through the conflict: the capital was controlled by the Houthis and the alternative capital of Aden—currently home to the internationally recognized government—was unable to provide the stability needed for a state to have authority.

Now, ironically, the closest resemblance to a state is in Marib because of its strong rule of law and internal security. As such, Marib has become host to **hundreds of thousands** of those who fled the war zones from all over the country. Marib has also served as a center for restructuring the national army in collaboration with the regional states and the international community to put an end to the Houthi coup d'état.

Not only has Marib developed structurally, but there have also been significant improvements from a human rights perspective. I personally have seen the local community in Marib change, especially regarding its attitude towards women. In 2010, I had founded a civil society organization we called [Marib Girls Foundation](#) to empower women in Marib, but because the local environment at the time was not supportive of our work and the community was not ready to see women working in civil society, we had to shut the organization down. Since then, the armed conflict has created opportunities to challenge the area's traditional outlook towards women.

The influx of those from more open communities in Sana'a has changed the dynamics of Maribi society, inspiring Maribi women to engage in public and political life. Maribi society accepted the women displaced from other regions—more accustomed to public participation—in their midst. This process slowly yet perceptibly changed the attitude towards women from the region, leading me to reopen the Marib Girls Foundation in 2016 with my sister. Ours was one of the very first women's civil society organizations in Marib and through it we challenged the discriminating traditional stereotypes against women, focusing on women's empowerment and especially on their role in peacebuilding.

Yet the conflict has never been far from the minds of those in Marib, even when the area itself was relatively peaceful. A special focus of our organization has also been combating child soldiers. This is a very important issue for me personally, having come from a tribal society where carrying weapons is an acceptable tradition for both youth and adults. However, the war made this practice more prevalent; as many boys younger than 18—even some as young as 13—were lured or forced into the front lines, only to return to their families in coffins, if at all.

Today, there are thousands of children sent by Houthis to the front lines, with estimated [statistics](#) of over 30 thousand child soldiers involved. The physical and mental consequences for these children are terrible. By allowing this coercion to happen, we as a society are stealing childhood from a whole generation of children, turning them into killing machines instead of allowing them to grow into productive members of Yemeni society.

Again, we have been able to make some progress on this issue in Marib. The first center for rehabilitating child soldiers has been established in Marib, but this effort and future efforts like it need to be given more attention. Moreover, through local mediating efforts, I was able to stop child recruitments in the armed conflict in Marib. This experience taught me firsthand that the tribal culture respects and trusts women's mediations and peacebuilding efforts. Later, I and my colleagues were able to extract a commitment from the Yemeni government represented by the Ministry of Defense to refrain from using children younger than 18 in armed conflict.

This is the kind of work that can be accomplished—even during conflict—when stability is preserved in a region like Marib. However, the recent escalation against my hometown, if allowed to continue, will destroy all the relative prosperity and socio-economic wins that we gained in a short duration.

Now, there is grave concern within the governorate that if the Houthis do succeed in taking over, they will launch a rampant, vicious clampdown on all the rights and freedoms we have worked so hard to build. Women like myself and my colleagues are especially worried—we have seen how women under Houthi control are being violated every day. Marib has made major strides in women's rights and protecting children. If the attacks on Marib are allowed to succeed, this will take us back decades in the ongoing fight for stability, equality, and progress. ❖



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