

# Breaking Point: Consolidating Houthi Military Setbacks in Yemen

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Brief Analysis

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**Washington can help preserve the recent coalition gains by categorizing the campaign as defensive, deterring further Houthi attacks abroad, and leveraging the next military deadlock to reinvigorate peace talks.**

**C**urrent battlefield dynamics in Yemen have deeply alarmed the Houthis, and perhaps no development demonstrates this more clearly than the group's decision to launch a [strike on the United Arab Emirates \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-strikes-uae-open-another-front-yemen-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-strikes-uae-open-another-front-yemen-war) earlier this week. Despite the likelihood that the January 17 attack will strengthen international condemnation of the Houthis and solidarity with the UAE, the Iran-backed group probably took this risky step because it fears battlefield setbacks more than diplomatic isolation. The evolving military balance in Yemen therefore deserves close review; indeed, various encouraging signs suggest that the best way to bring the Houthis to the peace table is to erase their hopes of a complete military victory.

## Successful Counteroffensive in Shabwa

**T**he UAE strike was prompted by one of the sharpest Houthi military reversals in the past three years. Just two weeks ago, the group was well-positioned to seize the major energy hub at Marib and another important oil production and gas pipeline corridor between that city and the Gulf of Aden, running through Shabwa province. In short order, however, a counter-punch by redeployed anti-Houthi reinforcements knocked the group's frontline

forces out of Shabwa and may soon relieve pressure on Marib.

How did this happen? As the authors warned in September 2019 after [another major collapse in Shabwa \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-fragile-military-balance\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-fragile-military-balance), the military balance in Yemen is quite fragile and prone to rapid transformations, largely driven by politics and morale rather than the introduction of new or superior military technologies. The seeds for the latest victory were laid by a pragmatic arrangement between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who have historically backed rival anti-Houthi forces in Shabwa—Riyadh supported the Islah Party, while Abu Dhabi backed local southern movements opposed to Islah. On December 25, the Saudis consented to remove Shabwa’s Islahi governor, Mohammed Saleh bin Adio, who was unable to unify the province’s defense or accept the rearmament of UAE-aligned local militias. He was replaced by Awadh Mohammed al-Awlaqi, a key tribal leader who has resided in the Emirates for most of the past fifteen years and has close ties with Riyadh as well.

Following the governor’s replacement, some eight brigades of the Amaleqa (Giants) force, each numbering around 1,500-2,000 fighters, redeployed from the Red Sea coast some 500 miles away. After halting the Houthi advance in Shabwa, they shifted to a counteroffensive, retaking the province’s northern districts of Bayhan, Nuqub, and Usaylan, then pushing into the neighboring Harib district of Marib province. The campaign quickly erased all the gains made by the Houthis during their offensive into northern Shabwa in the second half of 2021. The Amaleqa’s rapid advance now threatens to roll up the southern flank of the Houthi push on Marib city.

The rollback was mainly enabled by three factors.

- **Improved Saudi-UAE coordination.** For the first time since the beginning of the Gulf coalition intervention in 2015, Saudi and UAE-backed forces in Yemen are coordinating their operations at the tactical level, using a joint operations cell at Ataq airfield in Shabwa. Although Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have maintained cordial relations throughout their involvement, previous ground operations were often hampered by generally nonexistent coordination beyond the national political level. As a result, their forces and proxies often worked at cross-purposes. This damaging trend has now been reversed—for the moment, at least, they seem to be in sync at the political and tactical level. The rapid collapse of Islahi-influenced Yemeni army forces in northern Shabwa late last year, coupled with the hostile attitude of the former Islahi governor, seemingly led Riyadh to reassess its preferential support for that faction and move closer to the UAE’s position on the value of forces such as the Amaleqa.
- **Limited Emirati reengagement.** The UAE has not reinserted its own forces into Yemen or resumed airstrikes against the Houthis, but it reportedly played an important role in facilitating the redeployment of key forces to Shabwa. Apparently, some militia leaders who had been residing in the UAE were brought back to Yemen with Saudi approval and given the funding, fuel, and ammunition necessary for a sustained concentration of manpower against the Houthis. Such assistance has now begun flowing directly into Shabwa via Ataq airfield.
- **Effectiveness of the Amaleqa.** These brigades largely consist of veteran Salafi fighters from a range of provinces, and they are more willing than most Yemeni militiamen to fight on any battlefield, not just in defense of their home areas. The Amaleqa defeated the Houthis in multiple locations in the past, albeit usually with close “over the shoulder” support from the UAE military. The rapid switching of elite forces between different fronts was previously a substantial Houthi advantage, but it has been successfully countered in the latest Amaleqa campaign. The return of key Amaleqa commanders was an important factor in reactivating the brigades’ military potential.

## Policy Recommendations

In 2018, the UAE and Saudi Arabia sought to bring the Houthis under concerted military pressure on multiple fronts, with the aim of bringing them to the negotiating table and ending the war. That effort was undermined not only by insufficient coalition coordination, but also by international concern about the humanitarian ramifications

of a UAE-led offensive around the vital port of Hodeida.

After the Emirati withdrawal from Yemen in 2019, the Houthis could afford to concentrate on one front at a time, enabling **[gains in Marib \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saving-yemen-peace-process-blunting-houthi-push-marib\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saving-yemen-peace-process-blunting-houthi-push-marib)** and Shabwa in 2020-2021. In other words, reducing military pressure on the Houthis merely gave them hope that they could conquer all of Yemen by force—a shift that reduced their incentive to seriously engage in peace talks and, perhaps predictably, doomed multilateral diplomatic efforts after years of hard work. Since December, however, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and their anti-Houthi partners in Yemen have finally been demonstrating the ability to implement a unified national-level war strategy.

Going forward, it is important to recognize that the Houthis do not have to be pushed all the way back to their starting positions, but only to the mountains and out of rocket/artillery range from Marib city and local energy facilities. The U.S. government should tacitly support this effort to stabilize the Marib front and decisively check the Houthi route to all-out victory. To achieve this goal while preserving another U.S. priority—limiting the conflict's destructiveness—Washington should take the following steps:

- **Deter Houthi attacks on Gulf states and shipping.** If the recent Houthi strike on the UAE coerces Emirati leaders into backing down from their apparent reengagement in Yemen, it will set a dangerous precedent that may be imitated by other foes around the world—namely, intimidating a major U.S. partner with just a few low-cost militia weapons. Moreover, Houthi fears of further battlefield defeats may prompt them to launch more extreme attacks on not only the UAE, but also Saudi Arabia and international shipping, potentially killing more civilians, including Americans. To deter such attacks, the United States should privately signal the Houthi leadership that they will be held directly responsible for further strikes, with all judicial and military options on the table. Putting the leadership at personal risk is probably a more effective lever than **[re-designating the Houthi movement \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-terrorism-designation-more-likely-deliver-famine-and-entanglement-leverage\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-terrorism-designation-more-likely-deliver-famine-and-entanglement-leverage)** as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.
- **Categorize counteroffensives in Marib and Shabwa as defensive operations and provide nonkinetic support.** In the same manner that counter-missile and counter-drone operations are permitted to use offensive weapons for a defensive purpose, the Pentagon should officially characterize current coalition operations in Marib as a defensive operation. U.S. defense officials have **[previously described \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2582980/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-commander-us-central-command-holds-a-press-briefi/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2582980/general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-commander-us-central-command-holds-a-press-briefi/)** American assistance in Marib in a different light, so changing this categorization would require expanded authorities for the Pentagon and some significant executive-branch work on Capitol Hill. The goal should be to authorize U.S. intelligence support for defensive campaigns at the battlefield level, as well as for intensified interdiction of arms smuggling operations by Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah.
- **Encourage and facilitate restraint in urban strikes.** Nothing will evaporate residual international sympathy for the coalition like a major collateral damage incident in Sanaa or other Houthi-held cities. The United States should once again offer collateral damage mitigation assistance to the targeting cells in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Coalition operations against Houthi, Iranian, and Hezbollah missile and drone specialists have already become highly selective in urban environments, and U.S. expertise could further reduce the casualty risks.
- **Use a military deadlock as leverage to reinvigorate peace talks.** The Houthis are more likely to genuinely commit to negotiations once they no longer believe they can win the war outright—or, better yet, once they realize they will be increasingly isolated and punitively weakened if they actively oppose peace. Defensively consolidating Marib and other key battlefronts (Hodeida, Taizz, al-Jawf) against new Houthi offensives is the surest way of encouraging this change of heart.

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