

# The Challenges of Urban Fighting in Hodeida

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## The Saudi-led coalition would face several tactical and diplomatic challenges if full-scale fighting resumes on the coast, so it may seek a gradual, low-profile reduction of the Houthi presence.

The UN-brokered ceasefire in the Red Sea port city of Hodeida is barely hanging on. From the ceasefire's beginning on December 18 until January 8, the Yemeni government provided evidence to the UN of 681 Houthi attacks in northern Hodeida governorate, including 84 in Hodeida city, claiming to have suffered 17 fatalities and 198 injuries on that frontline. Furthermore, the Houthis **refused to meet UN deadlines** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/protecting-yemens-peace-process-from-houthi-ceasefire-violations>) to vacate Hodeida port by January 1 or the city by January 7. The Gulf coalition has not yet retaliated but Yemeni forces are beginning to regularly respond to such attacks. If the ceasefire collapses, a major battle would likely follow to liberate the city.

As UN efforts to strengthen the ceasefire continue, the Houthis have been busily enhancing the defenses of the city, in direct violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2451, which required combatants to cease all new fortifications and begin the dismantlement of defenses. Overhead imagery shows that the Houthis have constructed an average of 25 new trenches and 51 new barriers and minefields each week since the ceasefire began. They appear to be digging in for a long fight, not an imminent withdrawal. This begs the question: how hard would it be for the Yemeni military and its Gulf coalition backers to liberate Hodeida city?

The Houthis hold a 35 kilometer perimeter at present, including 20 kilometers of land frontline and 15 kilometers of coastline. Their urban defensive pocket is 15 kilometers by 15 kilometers, with the coalition wrapped around the northeastern suburbs and only six kilometers away from the port. It is unknown how many Houthi fighters defend

the pocket, but the number is likely to be somewhere between 2,000 and 5,000, counting both Houthi clansmen from northern Yemen and local recruits who may prove less reliable.

The Houthi defenses are laid out in three lines:

One defense line faces the sea and guards the coast road to the port. The southeastern end of the corniche is buttressed by the fortified university district. The Houthis are able to cover the open ground between the city and the airport from fortified nests at the southeastern edges of the city.

A second front faces east, with the frontline between the so-called “Kilo 8 triangle” and the Houthi defenses in Al-Saleh and Munther neighborhoods. After the coalition made strong progress in this area in November, the Houthis have put most of their effort into fortifying this frontline during the ceasefire. A maze of new barriers—mainly shipping containers—have been erected to provide more depth to the eastern defenses of the city center. The Houthis direct most of their shelling attacks on the liberated parts of the Kilo 8 triangle such as the City Max mall, the Hodeida Dairy and Juice factory and the May 22 hospital.

The third front covers the northern part of the city, with the coalition facing Houthi trench lines at the northern edge of the urban sprawl. High-rise apartment complexes serve as Houthi strong points and a second line of barriers has been erected 3 kilometers further into the city than the outer Houthi trenches. On this front, the port and the last road to the Houthi bastions of northern Yemen are tantalizingly close, just 6 kilometers away and clearly visible

The challenge of liberating Hodeida port may not be overwhelming because the 1.5km-long docks are located in an exposed area, outside the city proper and can be approached over open ground, where the precise application of coalition air power and heavy weapons would be highly effective. Instead, the city itself has always been the larger challenge, and at least some northern portions of the city must be cleared to enable the port to safely operate.

The Houthis are stretched reasonably thinly across the long perimeter of the defenses, though they are adept at reinforcing threatened points using networks of covered trenches and “mouse-holed” buildings to avoid air surveillance. They have quite a lot of depth to their defenses, with the potential of retreating into more dense neighborhoods near the city center, though the further into the city they retreat, the easier it would be to seal them off and contain them. Like the Islamic State defenders of Mosul, the Houthis would use mortars, rockets and drones to bombard newly liberated areas—as they have since 2015.

The coalition has learned a few tricks as well. In the highly successful fighting for the Kilo 8 triangle, the UAE provided extraordinarily precise urban fire support with small-warhead munitions that allowed individual Houthi fighting positions to be destroyed without causing civilian deaths or even structural damage beyond the exact part of a room targeted. Yemeni “Giants brigades” fighters demonstrated real skill and determination in urban combat. The coalition’s ability to undertake successful urban clearance operations is probably underestimated by most observers.

The above analysis suggests that, if the ceasefire breaks, the battle for Hodeida may be slow, but not necessarily intense or highly destructive. There may be no particular reason to hurry the fight, and it may be punctuated by further ceasefires as international mediation is attempted. The port has operated throughout the battle so far, and so has the northern road exiting the port, which allows imports to flow to northern Yemen at almost exactly the same rate as the closed road that passes through the eastern front line at Al-Saleh and the Kilo 8 junction. These flows might also continue, whether the port is back in the Yemeni government’s hands, operated by the UN, or still under Houthi control during further bouts of battle.

Regardless of operational realities, the coalition and the Yemeni government will have to cope with an unforgiving international climate if battle recommences. Though the Houthis appear to have deliberately sought a collapse of the ceasefire, performing provocative strikes such as the deadly January 10 suicide drone attack on a Yemeni military

base in Lahj governorate, blame will probably accrue to the coalition if they advance in Hodeida. The newly Democratic-controlled US House of Representative and a finely-balanced Senate still has an appetite for sanctions that would threaten the coalition's access to US arms and support. This may be another reason for the coalition to adopt a gradual, low-profile reduction of the Houthi presence in Hodeida.

*Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on The Brief website \(https://the-brief.co/the-challenges-of-urban-fighting-in-hodeida/\)](https://the-brief.co/the-challenges-of-urban-fighting-in-hodeida/). ❖*

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