# The Latest Cycle of Saudi-Houthi Escalation Is Different—and More Dangerous

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Brief Analysis

## The Houthis' ambitions, the regional stakes, and the strains on Yemen's population have all intensified, setting the stage for a potential quagmire unless Washington, Riyadh, and their allies can pair military pressure with diplomatic off-ramps and a much-needed political vision.

On October 10, Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthis attacked Riyadh's international airport, killing 13 people, including one American, and injuring over 300. The deadliest attack on Saudi Arabia in over a decade deepened an escalatory cycle already under way and could draw other countries directly into the fighting, including the United States.

Since July, the Houthis have sought to capitalize on the Iran war by coercing the Saudis into accepting a victor's peace—one that would entail abandoning the internationally recognized Yemeni government, lifting all restrictions on Houthi-controlled sea- and airports, and paying war reparations. Toward that end, the group imposed a blockade of Saudi ports on the Red Sea, while cross-border attacks and renewed ground warfare in Yemen soon resumed in earnest.

The airport attack came days after the Yemeni government announced a major Saudi-backed counteroffensive, which itself followed the Houthis' capture of Mokha port and coastal territory stretching south to the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Thus far, the counteroffensive's results have been mixed. Riyadh has deployed significant airpower, using around 100 **(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/oct/05/yemen-air-campaign-houthis-saudi-led-coalition)** fighter jets to help Yemeni forces make some progress in pushing the Houthis off the southernmost coastline. Yet the Houthis are striking back, continuing the fight around Mokha while tightening their punishing blockade around the southwestern government stronghold of Taizz and intensifying missile and drone attacks on

Saudi Arabia. On October 13, the kingdom's forces struck oil storage facilities in Sanaa, leading the Houthis to strike Saudi Aramco's headquarters in Dhahran. More such moves by both sides are yet to come.

The return of full-scale war and Saudi-backed military campaigns to "vanquish" the Houthis evokes deja vu. In 2015, Riyadh launched Operation Decisive Storm to restore Yemeni government control, and both sides have claimed to be on the verge of "decisive victory" at various points since then, even as the country sank deeper into fragmentation and poverty. More than a decade later, the Houthis are still firmly ensconced in the north. Yet this round is different, and more dangerous, for three main reasons.

First, the opposing forces in Yemen have evolved in ways that make the conflict more destructive. By backing Hamas during the Gaza war, the hierarchical, ideologically driven Houthis were able to expand recruitment, build coordination with other parts of Iran's "axis of resistance," and upgrade their missile and drone capabilities. They also used the four-year truce at home to expand domestic drone manufacturing, diversify weapons supply chains, and take advantage of Tehran's increased support. Even after last year's U.S. and Israeli bombing campaigns against the group, the Houthis emerged more capable of threatening the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia, and global energy markets.

By contrast, the pro-government side remains a fragmented coalition. Still, local fighters in areas like Taizz, Marib, and the former South Yemen—an independent state prior to 1990—have extensive experience fighting the Houthis, are determined to resist the group's expansion, and have acquired additional weaponry, including drones. There has also been a trend toward recruiting Salafi fighters into pro-government military units, raising the specter of more sectarian-tinged violence given the deep antipathy that some of these elements feel toward the Houthis, who are a radicalized offshoot of the Zaidi strand of Shia Islam. The National Shield Forces, the Emergency Forces, and the southern Amaleqa (Giants) Brigades are all heavily staffed with Salafis. In an ominous sign of what could come, Giants members recently **posted video (https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/yemeni-government-fighters-recorded-driving-vehicles-over-houthi-opponents-2026-10-06/)** of their units using armored vehicles to run over Houthi fighters, including some who appeared to be unarmed and fleeing.

Second, the resilience of Yemen's population has been strained by years of war, displacement, and deprivation. According to the World Food Programme, over **18 million (https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/wfp-warns-hunger-surging-yemen-conflict-displaces-thousands-enar)** of them face acute food insecurity, and the recent fighting has already **displaced 200,000 (https://www.iom.int/news/yemen-displacement-tops-200000-needs-soar-and-funding-alarmingly-dries)** . At the same time, humanitarian assistance has dropped precipitously—the United States has cut all funding to Yemen, and even top European donors have other priorities. Combined with renewed fighting, the result could be an even deadlier humanitarian crisis with generational consequences for Yemen and destabilizing spillover across the region.

Third, the stakes for the Middle East are much higher today. The Houthis are **firmly and openly aligned with Iran (https://www.foreignaffairs.com/yemen/irans-second-front)** , so their gains will strengthen Tehran's hand against the United States and its allies in the Strait of Hormuz and beyond. The Houthis also have their own destabilizing ambitions: they see themselves as both the rightful powerbrokers in Yemen and the tip of the spear in a regional transformation that would see Israel destroyed and America pushed out. Similarly, their expanding ties in the Horn of Africa—including with al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabab in Somalia—reflect a drive to exert influence in the Red Sea basin.

This pressure has left Saudi Arabia feeling squeezed from all sides: by the Houthis to the south and west, by Iran to the east, and **by Tehran's Iraqi militia proxies (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-prevent-militias-disrupting-iraqi-saudi-relations)** to the north. It has therefore decided to push back, cobbling together a multinational coalition to legitimize its latest offensive and internationalize the response to Houthi threats

in the Red Sea. Riyadh has significant foreign support, with countries such as France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Pakistan, and Turkey taking steps to help defend its territory—the latter two as part of the new **Mecca Joint Defense Agreement (https://www.mfa.gov.tr/strategic-political-and-defence-committee-of-the-makkah-agreement-for-joint-defence--joint-statement--31-august-2026.en.mfa)** signed in August. All are walking a fine line between supporting the kingdom's defense and avoiding direct offensive operations, though it is unclear how long this distinction will hold.

Ultimately, the ground war in Yemen will determine whether Houthi ambitions are contained or consolidated. The United Arab Emirates is arguably Saudi Arabia's most capable local partner, but Riyadh asked Abu Dhabi to withdraw its troops from Yemen earlier this year after UAE-aligned separatist forces made **a power grab in the south (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/yemens-seismic-shift-has-consequences-beyond-its-borders)** . The kingdom has since struggled to unify all Yemeni forces under its command. Continued Saudi-Emirati misalignment over Yemen is both a reflection and a cause of endemic infighting among government forces; until it is addressed, allied authorities will be hobbled both in war and in efforts to build a durable peace.

In turn, prolonged fighting will bring more suffering to Yemenis, more damage to Saudi infrastructure, and more disruption to global energy markets. It also risks drawing outside powers into a grinding proxy conflict. Following the Riyadh airport attack, President Trump is **reportedly considering (https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/iran-war-us-trump-saudi-arabia-houthi/)** direct military involvement. Yet while U.S. airpower could temporarily degrade the Houthis' capabilities and disrupt their leadership, it is unlikely to resolve the challenges they pose absent effective Yemeni forces on the ground and a unified political strategy.

Hence, one of the best contributions Washington could make is to help Saudi Arabia and the UAE mend fences while urging them to work with their Yemeni allies on a realistic strategy for deterring the Houthis and winding down the war. A decisive, nationwide military victory by either side remains highly unlikely, so a new political settlement will be needed in the long run. Yet with the focus squarely on escalation, scant attention is being paid to pairing military pressure with diplomatic off-ramps and a much-needed political vision for resolving Yemen's long-festering and now metastasizing conflict.

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