

# Is the Yemen War Really Deadlocked? Think Again.

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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## The Saudi-led coalition is already eyeing gains beyond the vital western coast.

It has become a cliché to say that the war in Yemen has reached a point of military deadlock. Rebel forces led by the Houthi clan control the capital Sanaa and the country's largest port Hodeidah, and they have a proven track record of slowing down the advances of the Yemeni government and the Saudi-led coalition.

That being said, the Houthis have lost a lot of ground since the apex of their territorial control in the spring of 2015, when they also controlled Aden and Taizz, the second and third largest cities in Yemen, the legendary Marib Dam, and Yemen's entire Red Sea coast. In the last three years, the Yemeni military and the coalition liberated Aden, Marib Dam, much of Taizz, the Bab el-Mandab Strait and half of Yemen's 420 kilometer Red Sea coast, in addition to driving Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) out of Mukalla city, nearby ports and Yemen's key energy export pipeline corridors.

The next coalition gain is likely to be the ports of Hodeidah and Saleef, plus the remainder of the Red Sea coastal plain. The fight will be tough, because the Houthis know that the loss of the coast will leave them landlocked for the first time since they seized control of the Red Sea port of Midi in 2011. Having an opening to the sea allowed the Houthi militia Ansar Allah to acquire modern armaments and training from Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah, including Iranian-manufactured Qiam 1 medium-range ballistic missiles capable of striking Riyadh.

While the Houthi defense will be strong, their forces in Hodeidah are heavily outnumbered by advancing Yemeni and coalition troops, and locally-recruited Houthi allies are likely to flip sides as the Houthis lose terrain. Already, UAE-backed Yemeni brigades are wrapping around the northeastern quarter of Hodeidah city, placing them within striking distance of the port and the last road through which the Houthis can draw reinforcements or escape.

If Hodeidah is liberated this year, as seems likely, the question is then whether the war has reached a point of

equilibrium, with the south, east and west liberated, while the Houthis remain quite capable of defending the northern highlands and Sanaa. When visiting the Nihm front in March this year, I GPS'd my position just 38.9 kilometers outside the US Embassy in Sanaa. But this last stretch is the longest, because the Yemeni military lacks the numbers or the cohesion to assault the capital. The Houthis have no incentive to bargain away their control of Sanaa in UN-brokered talks, and will likely value the capital even more highly if they lose control of their coastline. It could take years for the Yemeni military—split between loyalists of the late Ali Abdullah Saleh and pro-Muslim Brotherhood Islah Party members—to build the capabilities and unity needed to assault Sanaa.

In the meantime, there is one other option for the Saudi-led coalition. This is a direct assault on Saada, the heartland of the Houthi clan, and it has arguably already begun. On the northwestern side of Saada, Saudi Arabian forces are penetrating Al Malahidh district in the foothills of the Marran Mountains, the Houthi stronghold facing Jizan province, placing them 60 kilometers from Saada. To the northeast of Saada, Yemeni and Sudanese forces backed by the coalition are 20 kilometers from Kitaf, a town 50 kilometers from Saada that Saudi-backed Salafis view as a spiritual center. To the south of Saada, two coalition thrusts are slowly pushing from the west and east to cut Saada off from Sanaa—one group of Saudi-backed Yemeni and Sudanese forces coming from the coastal plain and one Yemeni front coming from the east, striking out from Al Maton district in Al Jawf province.

Though coalition progress is slow and costly on these fronts, Saudi Arabia feels it has plenty of time and more than enough forces to continue gaining ground in Saada province. If the Houthis are cut off from Iranian resupply and begin to suffer rolling defections, the rate of advance could increase. Saudi Arabia has quietly ramped up its direct contribution, deploying large elements of six Saudi Arabian National Guard and Royal Saudi Land Forces brigades into Saada. Riyadh is also replacing Yemeni battlefield losses in armored vehicles directly from Saudi Arabia's mammoth equipment reserves. As importantly, some of the most experienced Salafi fighters in Yemen, currently serving in large numbers on the Hodeidah front, are likely to be released for operations on the Kitaf front soon, where many of them fought the Houthis in 2004-2014.

The Gulf coalition believes that the Houthis currently have no incentive to withdraw from Hodeidah or Sanaa, which was graphically demonstrated when they failed to show up at the Geneva peace talks this month. This assessment is probably correct. For hardliners within the Houthi leadership, any agreement will probably result in them losing their current dominance in Sanaa and on the Red Sea coast. The coalition is likely to keep pushing militarily in order to shift this calculus. For Saudi Arabia, it is preferable to support a multi-year, or even multi-decade, war of attrition rather than let a southern Hezbollah establish itself on the Red Sea. The war may be deadlocked this year, but neither the Houthis nor Riyadh have short-term agendas in Yemen.

*Michael Knights is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

*The Brief*

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