

What Did the Gulf Coalition War Achieve in Yemen?

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

A conversation on the causes, consequences, and lessons of the Yemen war, including its implications for potential future conflicts between the Gulf states and Iran.

The following is a translation of a French-language interview conducted by the news magazine Paris Match. The English version originally appeared [on the website Middle East Transparent \(http://middleeasttransparent.com/en/michael-knights-interview-what-did-the-gulf-coalition-war-achieve-in-yemen\)](http://middleeasttransparent.com/en/michael-knights-interview-what-did-the-gulf-coalition-war-achieve-in-yemen).

Question: You have written [three most detailed articles \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-coalition-operations-in-yemen-part-1-the-ground-war\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-coalition-operations-in-yemen-part-1-the-ground-war) on the most "obscure" war of our time. Why do you think that we hardly talk about that war? Is it like "their" war...meaning between the Saudis and the Iranians, with no foreign powers directly involved?

Knights: One reason why Yemen is a forgotten war is that there are so many other wars happening in the region -- the Syrian Civil War, the Iraqi war against ISIS, Turkey's war with the PKK, the Libyan conflict, and so on. Each of these wars would, individually, be a big story in the "old days" before 2011: today they have all turned into smaller stories because they compete for column inches.

A second reason for the war's low profile is that this conflict is happening in an obscure country and without clear Western intervention, as you suggest. It is a complex story that goes back to the 1990s: it is hard to explain how the Houthis and the old regime of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh fought each other in six bitter wars but now are sticking together (with Iranian backing) to fight an internationally-recognized government under President Abd'rabu Hadi.

Question: Your description of the operations is amazing. Tanks, MRAPs, heavy artilleries, thousands of troops,

attack helicopters, and up to 300 sorties per day for the fighters. I cannot remember a case of an Arab air force achieving such numbers. Is this a strategic surprise?

Knights: Most people would find it surprising that a Gulf Arab Coalition could conduct this war with only behind-the-scenes support from Western governments and defence contractors. But it shouldn't have surprised defence analysts. Many of them allowed themselves to get outdated on the changes to Gulf militaries. Year by year they have modernized and professionalized. In this war even Sudan has undertaken multiple deployments of squadrons flying the advanced Su-24 ground attack aircraft. The UAE has been particularly impressive -- but people should have seen that coming. The Emirates have been getting really serious -- in part with French help -- about developing a powerful military. It may surprise readers to learn that the UAE has sent intervention forces to Lebanon, Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya and now Yemen. They have been building up to this war for a long time.

Question: Why did Gulf monarchies go to war? Was it an impetuous decision?

Knights: They went to war, in my opinion, to show Iran that they were willing to fight to prevent further Iranian expansion in Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen. They wanted to signal that even if the US made peace with Iran, the Gulf States were still willing to "go it alone" in defeating an Iranian-backed government in Yemen. Saudi Arabia and the UAE started down this path when they jointly sent troops to Bahrain during the Arab Spring. This was the next step. The UAE has also used this war as a way to build national patriotism and become a stronger nation.

Question: You say now it is time for mediation before the Gulf coalition begins an assault on Sana and Saada province, otherwise it could become bloody. Is such mediation likely to happen? Who can do that?

Knights: The sides need to negotiate, and the UN could be an international mediator. It was the UN that put Yemen under Security Council protection and called on all member states to prevent the rearmament of the Houthis. If an honest broker is needed from the region, Oman is an obvious choice as it has stayed neutral in the conflict. Really though, the key partners are Saudi Arabia, the Houthis and the Saleh loyalists. The local warring parties must see mutual benefit in ending the war. International pressure cannot substitute for that factor.

Question: It isn't clear how AQAP benefits from the situation, you say it flourishes mostly in "liberated zones," is that right? Could you explain?

Knights: AQAP and now ISIS have expanded their presence in southern Yemen during the chaos of the war. The Yemeni state has been at war with AQAP in its various forms for eighteen years. During the Arab Spring in 2011, as the Saleh regime was fighting for its life, half the army was still fighting large battles against AQAP in the south with US air support. When the Gulf-backed Hadi government fought the Houthis, the two main opponents of AQAP were distracted fighting each other. Now the Saudi Arabian military is starting to focus on AQAP at the same time as the war against the Houthis continues. Saudi Arabia and the US are closing down the main AQAP port at Mukalla and launching commando raids and airstrikes. The war just got even more complicated.

Question: The US administration seems reluctant about the Saudis shifting their war effort from Syria to Yemen. What message do you think Obama will deliver during his next visit on April 21st in KSA?

Knights: I don't know honestly. This is a good question for someone following Syria.

Question: There is a prevalent opinion, in the European press, that the Gulf Coalition did not achieve anything in its ground war. Well, what did it achieve? Could you please explain in detail?

Knights: As [my article notes \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-coalition-operations-in-yemen-part-2-the-air-war\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-coalition-operations-in-yemen-part-2-the-air-war), the air war removed a significant amount of the Houthi/Saleh missile force, damaged the Houthi/Saleh war machine, and provided significant and effective close air support to ground offensives, making those offensives succeed and at lower cost. Nobody fights a war without air support if they have

an air force: this is exactly what the GC is doing.

The ground war liberated Aden and Taizz, the second and third largest cities in Yemen. The offensive is not over yet - it may yet liberate Sana, the capital. Key Houthi ports may fall to GC ground forces along the Red Sea coast. Key oil and gas fields in Ma'rib and Shabwa have been regained for the government.

Iran's resupply of the Houthis has been significantly affected -- we can tell this partially from the captured items, including two shiploads in the last three weeks. The UN arms embargo on the Houthi/Saleh forces **has been enforced (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-coalition-operations-in-yemen-part-3-maritime-and-aerial-blockade>)**.

Question: Was the naval battle the front were the Saudis were the least prepared for war?

Knights: No, the Saudis have been focusing their Red Sea fleet on the interdiction of Yemeni coastal waters for a while, albeit to stem the flow of terrorists and economic migrants from Yemen. This naval war has been more intense than anything they have done before, but Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states have been participating in maritime intercept operations alongside international navies for nearly a decade. This has greatly helped with coordination and interoperability.

Question: The Saudis sustained losses on the border with Yemen: "In the last six months, missile teams equipped with Iranian-supplied 9M113 Konkurs, 9M133 Kornet-E, and Toophan missiles have knocked out around sixty Saudi tanks and other vehicles, plus a dozen border outposts and watchtowers." Any explanation?

Knights: The explanation is simple: Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran have replicated their exact formula from the Israel-Hezbollah frontline. Houthi/Saleh forces use the same weapons and tactics, taught to the Yemenis by Lebanese Hezbollah trainers. Most of the Saudi tanks are destroyed while being used as stationary border outposts or while slowly maneuvering towards border forts, making them an easy target. This is a very difficult military challenge to face. The Saudi answer is to hunt down the missile teams with Apache helicopters after they fire. This effort is slowly inflicting a cost on the Houthi/Saleh forces.

Question: The Gulf Coalition seems to have lost the propaganda war: there are claims that the air raids have resulted in thousands of casualties among civilians. What is your opinion? Did the Gulf Coalition make any effort to lessen civilian losses?

Knights: My **piece on the air campaign (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/gulf-coalition-operations-in-yemen-part-2-the-air-war>)** details this issue, but in summary the GC air campaign is like a 1990s NATO air campaign in the Balkans. Efforts are made to limit casualties but lessons are being learned, and the GC forces are not as well equipped as today's French or American air forces to reduce collateral damage. For instance, today's Western jets carry targeting pods that allow a pilot to superimpose a collateral damage ring over a target and show how far away civilians might be hurt. GC aircraft don't have that capability. The types of targets are also a factor. The Houthis merge in with the civilian population and use schools and hospitals as ammunition storage facilities, or use civilian petrol stations. GC pilots must make quick judgement calls whether to strike. Sometimes the call is wrong: even when the call is right, there may be civilian deaths. All air forces do this: if the target is important enough, they will accept some civilian casualties.

Question: A case in point, how to (technically) explain strikes against Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) clinics both in Yemen and, during the same period, in Afghanistan (when US fighters recently bombed a hospital, MSF claimed that the US air force had all its coordinates).

Knights: Only with a real investigation, perhaps by the UN, can we establish the facts, or rather beyond the facts that innocent people were targeted and killed. The GC should open its data up to international scrutiny because they

believe that they do try to limit civilian casualties. If that is true, they should welcome more transparency, at least for a UN investigation that could keep certain military secrets out of a final public report. I can say one thing: I very much doubt the US or even Saudi Arabia deliberately struck a facility with the intent to harm MSF personnel. This is a fantasy.

Question: In your opinion, what should Iran's Pasdaran conclude from a study of the Yemen War? And the US?

Knights: I won't do the Pasdaran's work for them, but the US and the Gulf Coalition may draw a range of conclusions.

First, that the military capabilities of the Gulf Arab countries, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have increased greatly since the 1991 Gulf War. They can now take the lead in running a major, complex, year-long military operation. They can mount amphibious landings, parachute assaults, maritime blockades, armoured blitzkrieg operations, and also undertake anti-missile defence.

Second, that a relatively limited investment of GC ground forces has had decisive positive impact on a range of battlefields, cementing government control in two of the three largest cities in Yemen and forcing the Houthis to the negotiating table as GC forces threaten to liberate the capital, Sana.

Third, that an air campaign can be militarily effective but can be politically disastrous if insufficient effort is put into making effective efforts to protect civilians and publicizing those efforts.

Fourth, that Iran can be opposed and beaten in areas where it is only partially committed, but that a real war with Iran would be a nightmare. The Houthis are not yet Lebanese Hezbollah. The GC effort may have prevented this outcome. But this means that the Gulf States have never faced the real Iranian military effort yet. This Yemen war is a training war: the real war between the Gulf States and Iran would be much harder. This is just the beginning for the Gulf States: they have brought back scores of coffins from Yemen but they must be ready to see skyscrapers and ports on fire in Dubai and Jubayl if a real war comes. And in such a war Iran would not be able to primarily spend the lives of Arab proxies -- Persians would be taking the casualties and their cities would be in flames also.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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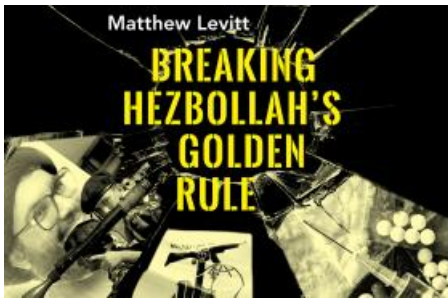
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