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PolicyWatch 2490

The Escalating Northern Front in Yemen

by [Michael Knights](#), [Alex Almeida](#)

Sep 24, 2015

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights](#)

Michael Knights is the Boston-based 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.

[Alex Almeida](#)

Alex Almeida is the head security analyst at a leading risk advisory firm.



Brief Analysis

The GCC-backed ground campaign to liberate Sana is building momentum, but urgent points of focus for U.S. security cooperation are becoming evident as Houthi resistance stiffens.

Since liberating the southern port city of Aden in July, forces loyal to Yemeni president Hadi Abdu Rabu Mansour and their Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies have been engaged in a multipronged offensive to roll back Houthi control of the south. The United Arab Emirates mechanized brigade task force and Egyptian special forces backed by Emirati and Saudi AH-64 Apache helicopters are now battling to control Taizz, Yemen's third-largest city. Similar task forces have fanned out into Abyan, Bayda, and Ibb provinces, advancing within a hundred kilometers of the capital and liberating the Balhaf oil terminal.

Houthi resistance has been stiffening in recent weeks, however. On August 25, a UAE-supported column ran into a Houthi ambush near Mukayras in Bayda province, losing at least seven UAE-supplied mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles. The northward advance on Sana is now pausing as a second front develops from the east.

EASTERN FRONT AGAINST SANA

On August 7, an armored column entered Yemen's Marib province from Saudi Arabia at al-Wadiyah border crossing, composed of UAE ground troops and Saudi-trained Hadi loyalists. On August 21-22, another Saudi-trained force under Sheikh Hashem al-Ahmar crossed into Marib under helicopter cover, with Oshkosh MRAPs backed by several RG-31 Agrab mortar carriers. Coalition forces then developed the remote Safir oil refinery and power station into a forward operating base (FOB) capable of sustaining an eastern advance on Sana, complete with an airstrip. Three days after the arrival of UAE military firefighting and ground support equipment, Apache helicopters began arriving at the airstrip, later joined by UH-60 Black Hawks and CH-47D Chinooks. As a result, the eastern front now has a resupply base close to the battlefield.

The buildup at Safir is impressive. Alongside UAE Presidential Guard commando teams and Saudi special forces, two brigade-size task forces have deployed there, including a battalion of UAE Leclerc tanks, a reinforced company of Royal Bahraini Army mechanized infantry with Otokar Arma armored vehicles, a battalion from the Qatar Emiri Land Forces with Piranha II armored fighting vehicles, and an Egyptian mechanized infantry battalion with an attached tank company. They are joined by several battalions of Saudi- and UAE-trained Yemeni tribal irregulars equipped with Emirati MRAPs and Nimr tactical vehicles. Saudi Aardvark demining vehicles are also present. Artillery support is provided by a battery of UAE G6 howitzers and M142 HIMARS multiple-rocket launchers. UAE Pantsir-S1 air-defense systems and Patriot antimissile batteries have also been deployed in greater numbers, particularly after a September 4 missile attack killed sixty GCC troops.

This battlegroup has been split into armored columns with Apache cover to begin probing toward Sana (directly west) and the Houthi heartlands (to the northwest). On September 14, a UAE/Yemeni column heading toward al-Jawf and Marib city sustained substantial losses as poorly trained tribal forces ran into Houthi minefields and ambushes, losing several MRAPs. They later cordoned Marib city and continued their advance to capture the Marib dam and Sirwah district, around 100 kilometers east of Sana. A similar scenario played out in Shabwa province to the south: after arriving from Marib on August 16, Saudi-trained Yemeni forces seized the provincial capital of Ataq, allowing pro-Hadi forces in the north and south to link up and creating a continuous line of land communications from Saudi Arabia to Aden.

HOUTHİ COUNTERMOVES

Houthi units and former Yemeni Army forces loyal to Ali Abdullah Saleh have responded to the coalition buildup in Marib by scaling up their cross-border raids into the Saudi provinces of Asir, Jizan, and Najran. Since mid-August, platoon-strength Houthi light infantry teams have overrun border forts and conducted deadly ambushes. The heavy Saudi losses have included one Apache gunship, three M1 Abrams tanks, three other tanks, one M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicle, four tracked armored personnel carriers, plus over two dozen MRAPs, Humvees, and light vehicles. And on August 23, the commander of the Royal Saudi Land Forces 18th Brigade, Maj. Gen. Abdul Rahman al-Shahrani, was killed during a border fight in Jizan. Since then, the raids have escalated into more sustained engagements that have forced the Saudis to call in airstrikes inside their own territory.

Houthi/Saleh forces have also increased their missile and rocket attacks into the kingdom. On August 26, a Scud fired toward the Jizan power plant was intercepted by a Saudi Patriot missile, and Najran Airport was attacked with BM-27 Uragan rocket fire on September 2. Airports in Asir, Jizan, and Najran provinces have been closed since July due to the rocket threat. The deadliest incident was the aforementioned September 4 missile strike, in which an SS-21 Scarab (a.k.a. OTR-21 Tochka) fired by pro-Saleh forces struck a vehicle park at the Safir FOB, killing forty-five Emiratis, ten Saudis, and five Bahrainis. Pro-Houthi media sources claimed four Apaches were destroyed, along with forty other vehicles.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. SECURITY COOPERATION

The ground operations to roll back Houthi control are progressing more rapidly than many critics of GCC military capacity expected. That said, Houthi resistance is stiffening, and the difficult task of liberating urban centers such as Taizz and Sana is still to come. So far, the campaign has highlighted a range of challenges that the United States could help its GCC allies overcome:

- **Missile defense tactics.** The September 4 attack underlines the severe risk that enemy surface-to-surface missiles pose to both coalition forces in Yemen and Saudi civilians. In addition to supporting GCC theater missile defenses, U.S. military advisors should focus GCC efforts on resilience and preparedness issues such as hardening bases, providing missile defense warnings and drills for troops, and planning emergency medical evacuation for mass casualty scenarios. They should also advise on operational security to prevent valuable targeting data from reaching the enemy via social media posts, as might have been the case at FOB Safir.
- **Armor survivability.** Houthi antitank missile teams are achieving an alarming level of success against the Saudis with 9M133 Kornet, 9M113 Konkurs, and RPG-29 systems. GCC and pro-Hadi forces will encounter similar problems as they penetrate deeper into Houthi-defended areas. The Saudi military needs urgent assistance to improve its armor survivability, including improvised up-armorings through add-on kits and better tactics and training. Israel's solutions to Hezbollah antitank missile teams deserve close attention in this regard.
- **Stability operations.** GCC forces, particularly UAE units, are now undertaking startup projects in Yemen to generate employment, supply hospitals and schools, and restore Aden's power grid. They are also rebuilding the city's eighteen police stations and paying the salaries of some 2,000 police personnel. This is a vital effort that the United States should support across the country, especially since al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the self-styled "Islamic State"/ISIS are filling the vacuum in many parts of central Yemen as Houthi forces retreat and pro-Hadi columns move on to new battlefields.
- **New unit generation.** To gear up for the eventual fight in the north, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Jordan have deployed a team of trainers to Aden with the objective of preparing a 4,800-strong "Salman Decisiveness Brigade" (named in honor of the Saudi monarch). Yet development of this unit is stumbling because southern separatist Yemeni militias are predictably unenthusiastic about deploying alongside tribal forces affiliated with northern factions under Maj. Gen. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar and the Islah Party. The shortfall in trained Yemeni recruits has forced the coalition to look elsewhere for manpower -- the UAE is now recruiting Somali volunteers, and Sudan is considering the deployment of 6,000 ground troops to go along with the aircraft it has already contributed. Although manpower is important, Washington should advise the GCC partners to be mindful of the unintended consequences of sending southerners into northern tribal areas, or of using troops from the Horn of Africa, since Yemeni locals might react negatively given recent economic migration trends and traditional Red Sea rivalries.
- **Conflict termination through dialogue.** The Houthis may be evicted from southern and eastern areas, and perhaps even from Sana, but Washington needs to begin thinking through its preferred end game to the conflict. The Saudi-led coalition should be dissuaded from pursuing maximalist goals such as subjugating Houthi home areas in Saada, which would be very difficult militarily and could result in protracted conflict with heavy civilian casualties. Washington is understandably keen to offset doubts about U.S. commitment to the GCC by extending all possible support to the Yemen campaign, but a true friend would help the Gulf states recognize the right moment to reopen talks with the Houthis to create opportunities for a negotiated end to the fighting.

Michael Knights is a Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. Alexandre Mello is the lead security analyst at energy advisory service Horizon Client Access. ❖



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