

Position Evaluation
December 2024

المركز
لدراسات الاستراتيجية
MOKHA
for strategic studies



Possibilities For Military Escalation Against the Houthis: Between American Goals and Saudi Conditions

FOREIGN STUDIES UNIT

WWW.MOKHACENTER.ORG

✉ INFO@MOKHACENTER.ORG

📱 [f](https://www.facebook.com/MOKHACENTER) [i](https://www.instagram.com/MOKHACENTER) [in](https://www.linkedin.com/company/MOKHACENTER) [yt](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMOKHACENTER) @MOKHACENTER



**Possibilities For Military Escalation
Against the Houthis:
Between American Goals and Saudi
Conditions**



Position Evaluation



December / 2024



We are a research institution concerned with studying Yemeni affairs and the regional and international influences on it. Through interpreting history, analysing the present, and predicting the future, in the aim of positive participating for better future of Yemen

Abstract

The internationally recognized Yemeni government has called for a new American strategy to address the escalating threats posed to Yemen and the broader region by the Houthi movement. During his address to the United States Senate on December 14, Yemeni Ambassador to the United States Mohammed Abdullah Al-Hadhrami emphasized the urgent need for such a strategy. He outlined three key measures for consideration:

1. Designating the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization akin to Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard,
2. Supporting government forces and their allies in recapturing the strategic port of Hodeidah and
3. Targeting Houthi leadership to dismantle its command structure.

U.S. diplomatic efforts have intensified in Riyadh, with senior American officials engaging with Yemen's legitimate leadership to discuss counterterrorism strategies. Following a meeting with Rashad Al-Alimi, chairman of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen noted, on the U.S. Embassy's "X" page, that discussions with President Al-Alimi, alongside Jesse Levinson, the head of the State Department's Counterterrorism Office for Middle East Affairs, focused on regional security and countering Houthi aggression both within and beyond Yemen's borders.

However, sources suggest that Saudi Arabia remains hesitant to engage in any military operations against the Houthis without a formal security partnership agreement between Riyadh and Washington. This raises the question: What are the prospects for a military campaign targeting Hodeidah, considering the interplay between U.S. objectives and Saudi conditions?

Hodeidah City: The Starting Point for Escalation

Hodeidah City holds significant American and international interest due to its strategic link to attacks on international shipping and military vessels in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It is anticipated that Al-Hodeidah and the western coast will serve as the focal point for any military escalation against the Houthis.

Situated in western Yemen, Hodeidah City is the capital of Al-Hodeidah Governorate, which stretches along the Red Sea coast between longitudes 42° and 43°E and latitudes 14° and 16°N. The city is approximately 226 kilometers (140 miles) from Sana'a, Yemen's capital, and the governorate spans an area of about 17,145 km² (6,620 mi²), distributed across 26 districts, most of which lie within the Tihāmah coastal plain.

Al-Hodeidah Governorate hosts three key ports:

1. The historic commercial port of Al-Hodeidah Governorate, renowned for its strategic and economic significance,
2. The Port of Al-Salif, known for salt production and export, and
3. The Ras Isa oil port.

These ports are strategically located along the western coast, between the northern port of Midi near the Saudi border and the historic port of Mokha to the south. The governorate also oversees numerous strategically critical islands, including Kamaran Island and the Hanish archipelago in the northwest, as well as Mayun (a.k.a. Perim) Island at the Bab al-Mandab Strait in the southern Red Sea.

The Houthis seized control of Al-Hodeidah Governorate in 2015. In response, the internationally recognized government and the Arab Coalition launched “Operation Golden Spear” in 2017 to retake the region.

Government-aligned forces managed to secure the coastal areas from Mokha in the south to Al-Khamsin Street, the airport and Kilo 16 on the northern outskirts of Al-Hodeidah City, coming close to recapturing the port. However, under pressure from the UN Security Council, which cited concerns about a potential humanitarian crisis, the Yemeni government and the Arab Coalition were compelled to participate in the Stockholm negotiations in Sweden.

In December 2018, the Yemeni government and the Houthis signed the Stockholm Agreement, which called for a cessation of hostilities in Al-Hodeidah, mutual withdrawals and the redeployment of forces under UN supervision. Despite this agreement, the Houthis did not comply with its terms, leaving the deal largely unimplemented.

The Stockholm Agreement effectively halted large-scale military operations on the western coast, though sporadic clashes persisted. The “Joint Forces”, allied with the legitimate government, posed a continuous threat to the Houthis in Al-Hodeidah. However, their sudden withdrawal from significant areas — stretching from the outskirts of Al-Hodeidah City to districts, like At Tuhayta, Ad-Durayhimi, Bayt al-Faqih and as far south as El-Khokha — was unexpected. This retreat allowed the Houthis to reclaim substantial territory along the western coast, undermining earlier gains by the legitimate government forces.

Hodeidah Back in the Spotlight

Recent Houthi attacks on international shipping and Western military vessels in the Red Sea have brought the city of Hodeidah and Yemen’s western coast back into focus. Western nations have increasingly recognized that Houthi control over Hodeidah and the surrounding coastal areas has facilitated these assaults.

In response, the region has been subjected to a series of airstrikes by American and British forces, alongside Israeli attacks. On July 20, Israeli aircraft targeted vital facilities, including oil tanks, causing significant damage.

According to media reports, the Israeli strikes resulted in losses exceeding \$20 million at the port of Hodeidah, along with the tragic deaths of six to nine individuals and injuries to more than 80 others. These attacks were seen by many as acts of retaliation aimed at curbing Houthi capabilities rather than direct responses to specific incidents.

Despite these strikes, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have persisted, prompting the United States to push for a more decisive approach. There is now growing American interest in supporting a military operation to help Yemen's legitimate government regain control of Hodeidah City and the country's western coast.

Meanwhile, the Houthis appear increasingly apprehensive about the possibility of such a military campaign. Their recent movements and leadership statements suggest heightened concerns, as evidenced by the deployment of significant military reinforcements to the strategically important governorate. For months, Yemen's legitimate government has been urging the international community to address the Houthi threat to maritime navigation. Officials argue that the most effective solution lies not in Western-led air strikes but in direct support for government forces to regain control of Hodeidah and its ports. According to these calls, a robust military operation is the key to ensuring safe passage for international ships and restoring stability to the region.

Impacts of Developments in Syria on Yemen

The swift developments in Syria, culminating in the fall of the Assad regime and the removal of Iranian influence, have sparked optimism among Yemeni circles for a potential shift in international attitudes toward the Houthi movement.

Yemen's Minister of Information, Culture, and Tourism Moammar Al-Eryani expressed hope that the region is entering a transformative phase marked by freedom and opportunity. He urged Yemenis to capitalize on this moment to reclaim their capital, land and future.

Al-Eryani highlighted that the region is witnessing the decline of destructive agendas and hinted at upcoming surprises that could reshape the geopolitical landscape in alignment with the aspirations of the people for security, peace and development.

Tariq Mohammed Abdullah Saleh, a member of the Presidential Leadership Council, echoed this sentiment, calling for intensified efforts and full preparedness for a moment akin to Damascus's return to the Arab fold. He emphasized the need for all loyal national forces to set aside differences and unite in their struggle for national salvation. Saleh also pointed out that the international community's stance has evolved significantly since the halt of the Hodeidah liberation battle. He noted that global awareness has grown regarding the threat posed by Iran's proxies, which endanger not only Yemen but also the broader region and international maritime routes.

Factors Driving Escalation Against the Houthis

Several factors are fueling momentum toward a decisive military escalation against the Houthis, starting with Hodeidah City and the western coast. These key factors include:

1. Increased International Support:

The recent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea have shifted the stance of major international players, particularly the United States and Britain, and, to a lesser extent, European nations. While these countries had previously pressured Yemen's legitimate government to halt its advance on Hodeidah in 2018, they now support a military campaign to liberate the city. This shift is largely due to the failure of air strikes to deter Houthi aggression in the Red Sea. Notably, the rhetoric of U.S. officials has increasingly framed the Houthis as a terrorist threat rather than a party that wants peace.

2. Diminished Iranian Influence:

Israeli strikes in Lebanon and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria have significantly weakened Iran's regional presence. This decline has spurred international and regional efforts to further undermine Iranian influence, with Yemen and Iraq emerging as key focal points. There is even growing consideration of directly targeting Iran's influence at its source.

3. Yemeni Aspirations for a Syrian-Style Outcome

The setbacks faced by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the rapid developments in Syria have inspired hope among Yemenis for a similar scenario. Many envision a resolution that would bring an end to the Houthi coup and restore the legitimate state authority with minimal cost.

4. Activity Within the Legitimate Authority

There are signs of increased movement and readiness within Yemen's legitimate government, particularly regarding developments in Hodeidah Governorate and the western coast. These efforts suggest a potential for significant progress in the near future.

5. Houthi Apprehension and Mobilization

The Houthis have publicly expressed growing fears of an impending military campaign. Media reports indicate that they have recently deployed significant reinforcements to Hodeidah Governorate from Al-Jawf, Dhamar, Sana'a and Ibb governorates. In addition, they have intensified their fortifications along contact lines, dug new trenches and planted extensive minefields in preparation for a potential surprise attack by government forces, now likely to receive robust international backing.

Saudi Reservations

The renewed American push for military escalation in Yemen has been met with conditional reservations from Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia recognizes the strategic importance of U.S. involvement in curbing Houthi influence and has sought to engage Washington throughout the war, it now has different considerations regarding overt participation in a potential new conflict. These reservations stem from several factors:

1. Limited Trust in the U.S. Role:

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have expressed frustration with the United States over the past two decades. They perceive a pattern of disengagement, particularly with the U.S. pivot away from the region and its pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran, which Riyadh views as empowering Tehran. During the conflict with the Houthis, American support was limited, and Saudi Arabia faced significant pressure from the U.S. to halt the war on humanitarian grounds.

From the Saudi perspective, this lackluster support undermined the war effort, while the Kingdom itself faced substantial risks, including frequent Houthi attacks on its cities and infrastructure. Moreover, U.S. actions — such as withdrawing forces and defense systems from the Gulf region, failing to respond decisively to Iranian proxies' attacks on Saudi oil facilities and Emirati cities, including the Houthis — deepened Riyadh's skepticism.

2. Conditions for Public Engagement

While Saudi Arabia is committed to countering Iranian influence, it prefers to do so discreetly. Sources suggest that Riyadh's willingness to participate publicly in an escalation against Iran and its proxies hinges on securing a comprehensive security partnership agreement with the United States. This agreement would mirror U.S. security arrangements with other allies, such as Japan, South Korea, Israel and Australia. Riyadh seeks guarantees of American defense in case of an attack, access to advanced U.S. weaponry and expanded nuclear technology.

On the other hand, Washington reportedly wants Saudi Arabia to curtail Chinese arms purchases, limit Chinese investments and establish diplomatic ties with Israel.

3. Strategic Considerations

If finalized, such an agreement would provide Saudi Arabia with a critical security umbrella against Iranian threats, particularly as concerns grow over Tehran's potential acquisition of nuclear weapons. However, negotiations over the agreement have faced challenges, primarily due to U.S. demands for Saudi recognition of Israel.

With Riyadh aware of the United States' strategic need for its partnership in the region, it has made the security pact a condition for engaging in war arrangements against the Houthis. Observers note that the likelihood of reaching such an agreement could increase under a future administration led by Donald Trump, compared to the current Biden administration.

Conclusion

The prolonged war in Yemen and the ongoing stalemate between peace and conflict can be largely attributed to the competing priorities and tensions among regional and international powers. Yemen has borne the devastating consequences of these contradictions, paying a heavy price in economic collapse and humanitarian suffering. It is imperative that these powers prioritize the interests of the Yemeni people over their geopolitical calculations and seize the opportunity to resolve the conflict.

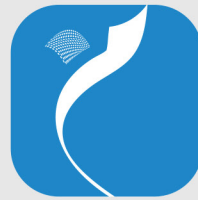
Saudi Arabia must take a decisive step by disentangling Yemen's conflict from the broader regional confrontation with Iran. By leveraging the current international momentum, Saudi Arabia has the chance to drive meaningful military and political shifts in Yemen, breaking the stalemate and paving the way for lasting peace and stability.

The international community also has a critical role to play. It must push for a resolution in Yemen that is akin to the transformative developments in Syria, focusing on sustained investment in Yemen's security and stability. This includes strengthening the country's legitimate political authority, mobilizing resources for reconstruction and promoting economic development. A long-term commitment to these efforts is essential to achieving a durable peace that benefits Yemen, the region and the world at large.

Sources:

1. Yemen calls for a revised U.S. strategy to counter the Houthi threats. (Al Arabiya Net, 12/16/2024) - Available at [link](#)
2. Significant diplomatic efforts are unfolding in Riyadh, while the Houthis continue to mobilize. Are these developments pointing toward a possible military escalation in Yemen? (Yemen Youth, 12/16/2024) - Available at [link](#)
3. View the tweet by the U.S. Embassy here: [link](#)
4. Al Hudaydah City in focus. (Al Jazeera Net, 12/16/2024) - Available at [link](#)
5. Has the “Red Sea flood” subsided after the Israeli attack on Al Hudaydah? (BBC Arabic, 12/16/2024) - Available at [link](#)
6. The withdrawal of joint forces from the West Coast: Key motivations and implications. (Mokha Center for Strategic Studies, 12/16/2024) - Available at [link](#)
7. Has the “Red Sea flood” receded after the Israeli strike on Hodeidah? (BBC Arabic, 12/16/2024) - Reference above.
8. Tariq Saleh urges the resolution of differences and preparations for National Salvation Day. (Asharq Al-Awsat, 12/16/2024) - Available at [link](#)
9. Houthi concerns about a potential military operation to liberate Hodeidah with international backing. (Previously mentioned source)
10. The Houthis express concerns over a potential military operation to liberate Hodeidah, with international backing. (Asharq Al-Awsat, 12/16/2024) Available at [link](#)
11. Saudi Arabia and the U.S. are reportedly on the verge of concluding a security treaty. (Al Arabiya Net, 12/16/2024) - Available at [link](#)
12. Why is Washington requiring Riyadh to normalize relations with Israel before a joint defense treaty can be signed? (BBC Arabic, 12/16/2024) - Available at [link](#)

المخا
للداسات الاستراتيجية
MOKHA
for strategic studies



WWW.MOKHACENTER.ORG

✉ INFO@MOKHACENTER.ORG

f t v @MOKHACENTER

