



## Towards an Arab NATO?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Arab Coalition in Yemen is facing three internal challenges: differences between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, Qatari meddling, and recent tensions between Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Despite these complications, new developments show that over the long run there is a likelihood of a strategic response to the stalemate in Yemen and to other Iran-related problems in the form of an upgrading of the scattered and divided Arab Coalition into a formal and organized infrastructure similar to NATO.

The Arab Coalition, which consists of Yemeni government forces, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Morocco, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Sudan, Jordan, and Academi (formerly Blackwater) mercenaries, is on the verge of a potentially decisive battle to liberate the port city of Hodeida from Houthi control. The offensive, dubbed “Golden Victory,” had been temporarily paused to allow the UN to negotiate a political resolution to the stalemate, including a Houthi withdrawal from the city. This resolution would avoid mass civilian casualties while clearing a path for the Coalition, backed by American, British, and French intelligence and logistical support, to secure the airport, which had served as the main entry point for humanitarian aid into the country as well as for Iranian missiles and other advanced weaponry. Having refocused on gaining ground on the outskirts of Hodeida and [other parts of the country](#), the forces are bracing for what could be a long and grueling task ahead.

The war in Yemen has dragged on for three years. The Saudi-led coalition has faced numerous obstacles: [untrained ground forces](#), [rough terrain](#) that has challenged the effectiveness of their air campaign, flawed or fluid [intelligence](#) provided by Western allies, a [merciless](#) enemy that has recruited [child soldiers](#), [tortured](#) prisoners, and used civilian targets and entire towns as hostages and [human shields](#), an influx of sophisticated weaponry and training from Iran and Hezbollah (as even the UN now [admits](#)), as well as assorted [terrorist organizations](#) seeking to destabilize the situation. Communicating this complicated set of facts to Western states used to quick,

decisive victories, while at the same time countering Iran-backed propaganda machinery and resolving internal disputes, has also been challenging.

Tensions have beset the Coalition, complicating its ability to stay focused on the mission. First, the UAE forces, which are better trained, have backed a separatist group opposed to the Saudi-backed Hadi government. The UAE's mission and interests lean more towards combating Islamists than towards countering Iranian influence, whereas Saudi Arabia views Tehran's support for the Houthis – who have repeatedly fired in Riyadh's direction and whose missiles on occasion have reached it – as an existential threat.

Second, Qatar, which used to be part of the coalition, was asked to leave in 2017 following the imposition of the blockade by the Anti-Terrorism Quartet (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain). Qatar's departure split the Hadi government, some members of whom sympathized with Doha while others backed Riyadh. While many public reasons were given for the air, naval, and land blockade against Doha, which has proved largely ineffectual after a year, there has not been much discussion of the likely military reasons for kicking Qatar out of the Coalition, despite the costs. In addition to accusations of Doha's support for Iran, there may be evidence that Qatar was [clandestinely aiding](#) the enemy. Recently, a Qatari national was captured sneaking out of Yemen; he allegedly was an [intelligence officer](#) assisting the Houthis.

Third, recent tensions between Morocco and Saudi Arabia threaten to destabilize the Coalition, as some voices in Morocco are [urging](#) Rabat to withdraw all forces from Yemen. The reason for the spat, which has the potential for dramatic and undesirable consequences, is multifold. According to some experts, Morocco and Saudi Arabia are [competing](#) as beacons of moderate Islam, which ultimately means competing foreign policies and lack of cohesion in coordinating commitments. That explanation, however, is inaccurate, as Morocco has sought to steer clear of regional rivalries and conflicts by developing its identity as an [African](#), rather than a Middle Eastern, state. If that is indeed the reasoning, a friendly competition could push both countries to develop strong educational and cultural institutions that would benefit both regions.

If taken too far, however, this would be both futile and damaging as the countries share important goals and interests. Each could be a leader in their respective regions, working closely together on resolving common concerns and complementing each other's strengths. Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that Morocco has pursued an independent foreign policy, including refusing to participate in the blockade of Qatar, and indeed maintaining a growing trade relationship with that country.

This has irked Saudi officials, including the head of the General Sports Authority, Turki al-Sheikh, who attempted to strong-arm Morocco into following Riyadh's lead through public comments as well as through Saudi Arabia's support for the North American joint World Cup 2026 bid, in opposition to Morocco's bid.

The proximate cause of the cooling in relations came out of that chain of events. Al-Sheikh, unhappy about Rabat's continuing relationship with Doha and the supposed insufficiency of Moroccan forces in Yemen, put a great deal of energy into underscoring those grievances and supporting Donald Trump's odd interest in the World Cup by hosting parties for EU, Middle Eastern, and FIFA officials and lobbying countries that would otherwise have sided with Morocco but ended up voting for the US instead.

As a result of these developments, Rabat, which considered these moves to be acts of betrayal, found itself [too busy](#) to participate in the Saudi-led emergency session on Yemen that took place on June 23. These developments could be damaging to the fragile balance of powers in Yemen. Iran is sure to delight in such public disagreements and to perceive the growing distrust as a sign the coalition is weakening, in Yemen and elsewhere. Likewise, these disagreements detract from battlefield cohesion. The Coalition faces the daunting tasks of demining the booby-trapped environs of Hodeida and having to [fight through the streets](#), where Houthis have positioned themselves to maximize the damage they can inflict on incoming forces and civilians. (The alternative, attacking by water, is unlikely given that Iran sent a [flotilla](#) to the Gulf of Aden.)

Additional obstacles are mounting. The recent elimination of eight Hezbollah fighters by the Coalition confirmed the group's direct involvement in Yemen. Elite and well-trained, Hezbollah in Yemen is [tasked](#) with transforming the Houthis into a medium-sized army capable of sophisticated operations around the world, with the Houthis quickly gaining in weapons and skills what they lack in experience. The Coalition, meanwhile, is accused of not having a coherent strategy towards retaking the city, much less securing the port to prevent future infiltration.

Because of the sophisticated nature of the enemy, the Coalition cannot afford the luxury of superficial spats over tangential matters. In every challenge, though, there is an opportunity.

Hezbollah's growing presence in Yemen may compel US forces and the CIA to increase counterterrorism involvement and unite the fractious Coalition members around the common threat. US involvement has been limited so far to gathering intelligence, deploying [Green Berets](#) (who help identify missiles the Houthis are using against Coalition forces and Yemeni and Saudi civilians), and countering al-Qaeda and ISIS. Ironically, the relatively minor American support to the Coalition has resulted in its sometimes acting at [cross purposes with Riyadh](#) (and increasingly distancing itself from major operations, such as "Golden Victory"). The kingdom has allegedly tried to coopt some of the local groups, including [al-Qaeda](#), as a bulwark against the Houthis.

There is no public support for increasing the American troop commitment for what is widely viewed as a proxy war against Iran (though it is no longer proxy, as both Iranians and Saudis are on the ground). Indeed, existing US involvement has been

controversial in Congress, with several failed resolutions pushing for withdrawal. Moreover, increasing the US military presence to fight the Houthis directly might be considered an act of war, which could require Congressional authorization beyond the current AUMF.

However, expanding the scope of counterterrorism operations against non-state actors would not pose such challenges. Fighting Hezbollah has become a Trump administration priority, particularly as recent revelations have demonstrated its extensive presence in Latin America, collaboration with drug cartels, and [infiltration](#) into the US. Hezbollah likewise is playing a [damaging role](#) in Syria, alongside Iranian forces, Iraqi and Syrian militias, and Assad's army. Bahrain is [not immune](#) to infiltration, and Hezbollah has managed to utilize the Lebanese Air Force, which the Pentagon arms, to put [sophisticated weapons](#) in the service of its agenda.

Hezbollah, with the help of Iranian diplomats, in what appears to be part of a pervasive pattern of financing its operations through criminal and terrorist activities, is [arming the North African separatist group Polisario](#), which threatens Morocco's territorial integrity and sells illicit arms to other unstable countries. And most recently, a Vienna-based Iranian diplomat, now [stripped](#) of his diplomatic immunity, was caught in Germany for, along with cohorts in Belgium and France, plotting a terrorist attack against an Iranian opposition rally in Paris. That Hezbollah is likely involved in this plot should come as no surprise, as it has been associated with other terrorist attacks all over the world. Hezbollah and associated Iran-backed proxies have become a truly global problem that threatens the security and stability of all the allies, Western and Arab.

Until now, however, the response of the Arab Coalition has been subdued and limited, with little action beyond designating Hezbollah as an international terrorist group. In Lebanon, Hezbollah – perhaps reinvigorated by the [failed coup](#) against Hariri – has been working hard to [split](#) the Saudi and UAE-backed Sunni bloc. Furthermore, Hezbollah has become more successful at recruiting disaffected Shiites in Lebanon by taking advantage of the [proliferation of drugs and lack of development](#), particularly in tribal areas.

There is an opportunity here for the Arab Coalition to counter this influence by infusing development aid directly into these areas and combating drug trafficking through specific, targeted means. There is also room to exploit existing divisions. This fertile area (Beka), filled with violent tribes, has been misled and deceived by Hezbollah, which has recruited foot soldiers from there while stacking the officer ranks from bigger, more central cities. And despite Hassan Nasrallah's [words of solidarity](#) towards the Houthis, he is hiding in his bunker rather than leading the troops to battle. That is a major weakness that the Coalition can counter to demoralize the enemy through effective joint information warfare.

Tehran's strategy of seeking to build naval bases and gain control of strategic waterways all over the world – the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab al-Mandeb, the Horn of Africa – endangers the interests of the international community far beyond the Arab Coalition. Iran relies on strong, flexible, and resilient non-state proxy groups like Hezbollah to clear the way and secure these victories. Until now, the Arab Coalition and the West have been playing whack-a-mole with terrorists, occasionally freezing accounts, arresting key figures, or blowing up bases. However, with the clear strategic vision of Hezbollah's expanse across many continents and countries, the Arab Coalition together with the US and its allies can join forces to combat this encroaching threat. In so doing, they can deal a mortal blow to the Islamic Republic itself, severing the source of financing to its remaining proxies.

Rather than being distracted by differences and short-term, parochial goals that alienate Coalition members at the cost of its strategic interests and global security, the partners should work to create the NATO of the Arab World. The Arab NATO would be a military and security alliance dedicated to defense and insulated from economic, diplomatic, or political disputes. Such a system would also survive rival personalities and leadership changes. The US can play a vital role in the training, strengthening, and support of the nascent Arab NATO, which should also cultivate willing and capable partners against common enemies. Hezbollah's role in conflicts that threaten everyone concerned would be a great place to start.

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