![TA] **Tomorrow's Affairs**

Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Nawaf Obaid

How did Saudi Arabia cause the turnaround in Yemen?

For much of the past decade, Yemen was treated as a cautionary tale—evidence, so the argument went, that airpower could not impose order on a fractured civil war and that regional militaries were condemned to grind themselves down in complexity they could not master.

That reading was convenient. It was also wrong. What unfolded over the past year—and what began decisively with the Mukalla operation—was not a marginal improvement but a structural reversal.

Yemen did not change because of new weapons or louder strikes. It changed because Saudi Arabia finally learned how to command the battlespace.

Saudi Arabia's initial intervention in 2015 was not merely ineffective; it was strategically blunt and operationally incoherent.

Airstrikes accumulated without producing control. Intelligence arrived in snapshots rather than streams.

Command-and-control was reactive, fragmented, and insufficiently fused across domains.

The Houthis adapted faster than they were constrained. Pressure was applied, but behaviour did not change.

The lesson was unforgiving: firepower without architecture produces endurance on the adversary's terms.

The transformation was not cosmetic

What followed was not denial but learning. Over the next decade, Saudi Arabia—driven by the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) and a restructured high command—rebuilt the way it fights.

The transformation was not cosmetic. It was architectural. The shift from a weak and episodic C4ISR to a mature, governed C5ISR framework changed the logic of operations from attrition to control. Intelligence became continuous custody; strikes became enforcement; escalation became a managed condition rather than a gamble.

The Mukalla port incident was the proof point. It was not a raid or a discrete strike but a continuous intelligence-to-effects sequence in which Saudi command never lost custody—from maritime anomaly detection to port entry, cargo identification, inland movement, coercive reversal, kinetic enforcement, and post-strike deterrence.

> Mukalla was not the end of an operation; it was the beginning of a phase change

Behaviour triggered action, not attribution. Signature suppression and abnormal routing were identified immediately; maritime awareness transitioned seamlessly into port surveillance; vehicles and payloads were tracked inland; intent was validated before force was considered.

Most tellingly, force was not the opening move. Visibility itself compelled behaviour. Military transfers were frozen. Armoured vehicles were ordered returned. Partial reversals occurred without a single munition being released.

This is the essence of mature C5ISR: violence is credible precisely because it is disciplined, precise, and fully informed.

When kinetic action was authorised, it was enforcement—not punishment. Timing reflected confidence, not urgency. Civilian presence had been cleared. Secondary effects were bounded. Custody continued after impact, ensuring compliance and deterrence.

Mukalla was not the end of an operation; it was the beginning of a phase change.

Control, not attrition, decided the outcome

That phase change manifested on land within hours. The same C5ISR architecture that governed the air campaign fused directly with Saudi-trained Yemeni ground forces—most critically the National Shield Forces (NSF) and other Saudi-supported Yemeni government units.

Command authority, ISR feeds, and fires were integrated into a single operational picture.

Air did not "support" ground in the traditional sense; it synchronised ground manoeuvre by denying the adversary the ability to move, hide, or coordinate.

> ### This was not a battle of manoeuvre so much as a collapse of adversary coherence

Within roughly 72 hours of Mukalla, Hadhramaut—the key province—reversed.

This was not a battle of manoeuvre so much as a collapse of adversary coherence.

Saudi-trained Yemeni units advanced along pre-cleared axes under persistent ISR coverage.

Where resistance appeared, it was isolated, fixed, and neutralised with precision strikes. Where resistance did not appear, units melted away. Control, not attrition, decided the outcome.

The inflection point

The inflection point was Rayyan military base. Rayyan was not simply a base; it was the command-and-control node through which the UAE armed forces had coordinated the STC's military network across the east and south.

Once Rayyan was neutralised and placed under continuous Saudi custody, the adversary's system did not degrade gradually—it failed abruptly.

Orders became contradictory or impossible to execute. External tasking no longer matched reality. Units lost confidence that they were being seen, supported, or directed.

At that moment, Saudi escalation dominance became explicit. The UAE was presented with a binary choice: evacuate or face decisive strikes that would have decimated its deployed forces and command infrastructure.

> ### With Rayyan gone and external command withdrawn, the southern provinces rolled up with remarkable speed

The evacuation order followed—not as a political accommodation, but as an operational judgement that resistance under continuous Saudi ISR custody and air dominance was untenable.

The effects cascaded. With Rayyan gone and external command withdrawn, the southern provinces rolled up with remarkable speed.

Mahra followed Hadhramaut. Mukalla fell without a fight. Shabwa could not be held. Saudi-trained government forces streamed through positions that no longer had a functioning command chain.

Where pockets attempted resistance, airstrikes were applied surgically to open corridors and protect advancing units.

More often, forces simply disengaged. They were not defeated; they were orphaned.

Intelligence, command authority, and decision speed

This is the critical point often missed by outside observers: the turnaround in Yemen was not achieved by airpower alone.

It was achieved by fused command-and-control that integrated air, land, intelligence, and decision authority into a single system.

Saudi-created and Saudi-funded Yemeni forces were effective not because they were numerous, but because they were commanded coherently.

They advanced knowing where the enemy was, where he was not, and where he could not go.

The RSAF sits at the centre of this system. Saudi Arabia now operates the largest, most integrated 4.5-generation fighter fleet in the Middle East, fused into a resilient C5ISR backbone that enables persistence rather than episodic superiority.

> ### Saudi Arabia built its dominance through procurement, institutional learning, and architectural integration

Scale matters—but only when scale is synchronised with intelligence, command authority, and decision speed.

Under conditions of continuous ISR custody, the RSAF's mass, readiness, and integration produce an air dominance envelope that no regional actor can credibly contest—except Israel, whose fifth-generation stealth fleet and indigenously developed C5 command architecture—enabled by decades of overwhelming U.S. military aid and integration—place it in a distinct and singular category.

That exception underscores the achievement. Israel's dominance rests on sustained external assistance layered onto indigenous innovation.

Saudi Arabia, by contrast, built its dominance through procurement, institutional learning, and architectural integration—assembling a modern command-and-control system largely from scratch, under combat conditions, and over time.

Yemen is not "solved"

The strategic effects extended beyond Yemen's borders. Compliance followed clarity. Withdrawal followed exposure. Negotiation followed the demonstration that escalation control rested decisively with Riyadh.

The strategic victory over the UAE in Yemen was not theatrical; it was structural—the predictable outcome of a system that left no credible military alternative to compliance.

In modern war, victory belongs not to those who strike hardest, but to those who command the system through which force is applied

Yemen is not "solved," and no serious strategist would claim otherwise. The Houthis remain under sustained pressure, particularly along unified aerospace and coastal control corridors, and future phases will pose difficult political and military questions.

But the centre of gravity has shifted irreversibly. Mukalla was the beginning—not because it destroyed something, but because it proved that the Saudi Arabian armed forces could now see continuously, decide coherently, and enforce outcomes across domains.

That is the real lesson of Yemen. In modern war, victory belongs not to those who strike hardest, but to those who command the system through which force is applied.

The Saudis failed to do that in 2015. They do so today. And that difference has changed the war.

Dr Nawaf Obaid is a Senior Research Fellow at the Department of War Studies, King's College London.