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Yemen crisis: Warships pave the way for a ground invasion

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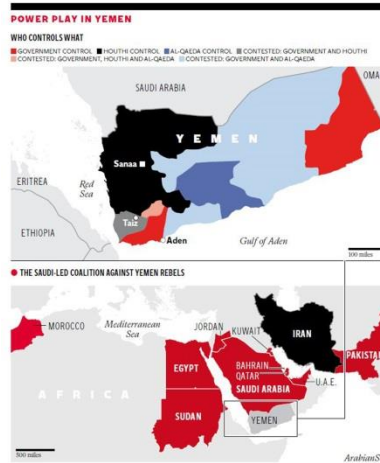
Saudi and Egyptian warships deployed to the Bab al-Mandab strait off Yemen yesterday, aiming to secure a strategic sea passage as the Saudi-led coalition targeting Houthi rebels laid the foundations for possible ground operations.

A top priority after the air campaign has weakened the rebels is for coalition troops – likely Egyptians – to move into the southern port city of Aden, Yemeni and Egyptian military officials said. Aden is a main stronghold of supporters of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who was forced to leave the country as the rebels and their allies moved on the city.

Hadi arrived in Egypt yesterday, where Arab leaders will be meeting to discuss the crisis. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he would discuss the crisis with Arab leaders at the weekend.

Resolving the situation could prove a tough prospect. Yesterday, rebel fighters and their allies – loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh – were moving toward Aden, aiming to reinforce their fighters already in the city. At the same time, pro-Hadi military units and militiamen were fighting rebel forces in street battles in several cities. Yesterday's events, and the comments by

the military officials, gave an initial picture of Saudi and Egyptian plans in the conflict that abruptly burst into a regional fight on Thursday after months of chaos in Yemen.



Saudi Arabia and its allies are aiming to push back the Shiite rebels, known as Houthis, and Saleh’s forces, which have taken over the capital Sanaa, and much of the mountainous, impoverished nation. The ultimate goal is to restore Hadi. Saudi Arabia fears the Houthis will give Shiite powerhouse Iran a new foothold on its southern border.

Yemeni Foreign Minister Riad Yassin said there was an “arrangement” for ground troops of the Saudi-led coalition to deploy in Yemen. After more than 36 hours of airstrikes by Friday afternoon, more than 40 percent of Yemen’s air defences were destroyed, according to Yemeni Brig. Gen. Saleh al-Subaihi, a pro-Hadi officer. Yemeni security officials said around 80 fighters had been killed in the strikes.

The first salvo of airstrikes before dawn Thursday also killed 18 civilians – including six children in Sanaa.

Retired Yemeni army officer Nasser al-Marqashi said he expects the airstrikes to continue for a week to weaken the air defences before a ground offensive.