Special Publication

The Campaign in Yemen: Al-Mokha as a Case Study for Houthi Entrenchment and the Limits of Saudi Power

Danny Citrinowicz and Shmuel Nahum[1] - A joint publication by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and ImageSat International (ISI) | November 25, 2026

In September 2026, the Houthis seized control of the city of Al-Mokha on Yemen's western coast, approximately 80 kilometers north of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. A counteroffensive by Saudi-backed forces failed to restore stable control over the city. Analysis of satellite imagery from August and October 2026 points to extensive fortification work, including the digging of trenches and the construction of earthen berms and roadblocks, and most notably a double defensive line south of the city, which may indicate preparations for a counteroffensive. At the same time, camps used by government forces appear to have been evacuated, the airport has been shut down following Saudi strikes, and civilian activity has declined. These findings reinforce the assessment that the Houthis are preparing to establish a prolonged foothold in Al-Mokha, whose location grants it strategic importance near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, although they do not prove that the Houthis have full control over the surrounding area. Developments in the city illustrate the limits of Saudi power: air superiority and tactical gains do not guarantee sustained control on the ground, and the more the Houthis fortify their hold, the greater the difficulty and cost involved in attempting to dislodge them.

Situation Overview: Yemen and Al-Mokha

In September 2026, the Houthis recorded significant gains along Yemen's western coast, chief among them the capture of the city of Al-Mokha. In early October, forces aligned with the Yemeni government, backed by Saudi Arabia, launched a counteroffensive in an attempt to reclaim the lost territory, but failed to establish stable control. Concurrently, continued Houthi

[1] Shmuel Nahum is a senior geospatial researcher at ImageSat International (ISI).

pressure was reported in the Taiz area and along the transit routes leading to Aden. The difficulties faced by the Saudi-backed forces stem not only from the Houthis' military capabilities, but also from the deep divisions within the anti-Houthi camp, which impede the coordination of military operations and, above all, the ability to hold territory over time. The situation in Al-Mokha raises doubt regarding the achievements of the counteroffensive.

A comparison of satellite imagery from August 19 and October 28 points to extensive fortification work around the city, including the digging of trenches, the construction of earthen berms, the reinforcement of defensives to the south, and the placement of roadblocks along major access routes. At the same time, the camps formerly used by government forces appear largely empty. These findings reinforce the assessment that the Houthis are working to consolidate their hold on the city and are preparing for the possibility of another counteroffensive. However, the imagery does not allow for a definitive determination regarding the extent of Houthi control in the area outside the city or the situation after October 28. Therefore, a distinction should be made between the defensive entrenchment visible in the imagery and the assessment of full, continuous Houthi control across the entire region.

Visual Findings: Al-Mokha Following the Houthi Takeover

Al-Mokha is situated on the Red Sea coast, approximately 80 km north of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and its location grants it strategic importance that exceeds its size. The city lies along Yemen's western coastal axis, near one of the world's most vital shipping lanes. Control of Al-Mokha makes it possible to establish a foothold on the western coast and influence access routes to the strait. During September 2026, the Houthis seized control of the city following the withdrawal of forces aligned with Yemen's internationally recognized government. Throughout October, conflicting reports were published regarding the identity of the forces controlling the city. However, the satellite image from October 28 shows extensive fortification activity, consistent with Houthi entrenchment and preparations to hold the city in the event of a counteroffensive.

A comparison of the October 28 image with the one from August 19 reveals a marked change in the defensive layout around Al-Mokha within roughly two months. Earthworks can be seen across large sections of the city's perimeter, including trenches and earthen berms. The work was still underway when the later image was taken, and the fortification line had not yet been completed along its entire length. Particularly prominent is the southern section of the city: a double trench is visible there, compared with a single trench in most other sectors. This may indicate that the Houthis assess the southern sector to be more vulnerable to a ground assault, due in part to the possibility that government forces may attempt to advance toward the city from that direction (Figure 1).

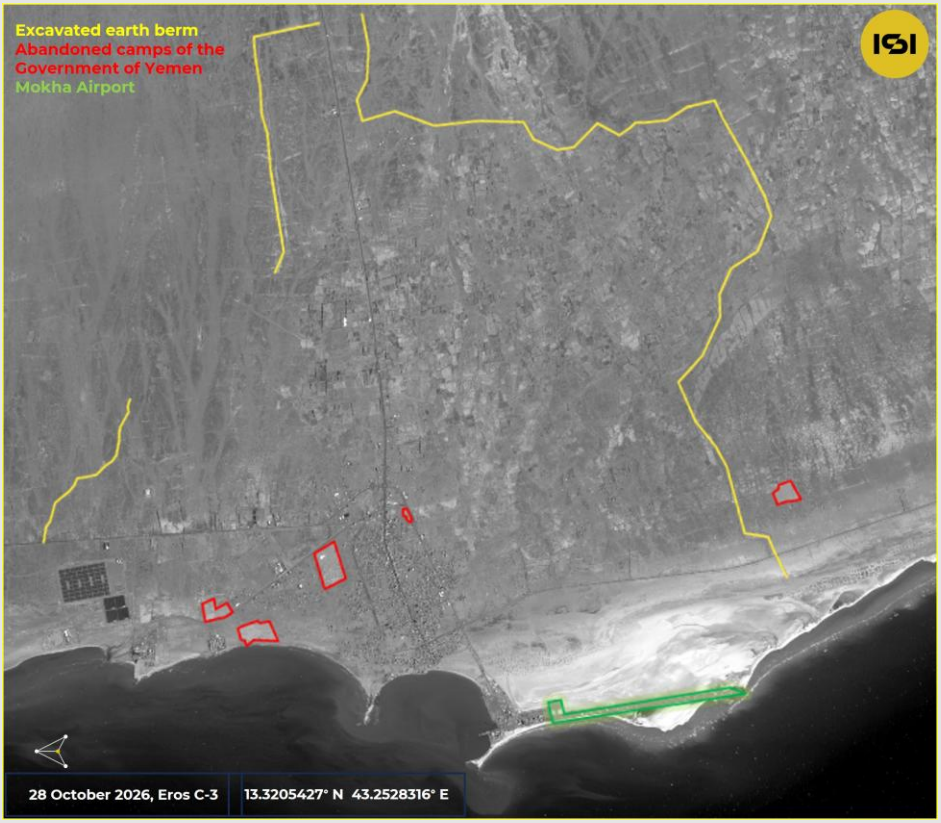


Figure 1 – Map of Houthi Control in Al-Mokha

In addition to the fortification work, checkpoints and roadblocks can be identified along all the main routes into Al-Mokha, from the north, east, and south. The combination of trenches, earthen berms, and roadblocks indicates an effort to establish control over the city, and not merely to hold it militarily. The checkpoints enable the Houthis to monitor incoming and outgoing traffic, restrict access routes, and make it harder for hostile forces to infiltrate quickly. The Houthis appear to be seeking to stabilize their hold on the city through a perimeter defense system and control of its roads, even without the overt deployment of large mechanized forces.

It is important to note that fortification work continued through late October, while forces aligned with the Yemeni government were trying to retake the city. This reinforces the assessment that the work was not merely a reorganization following the capture of Al-Mokha, but also preparation for the possibility of a counteroffensive. The focus on blocking access routes and strengthening the defensive perimeter may indicate that the Houthis are preparing to hold the city even if fighting resumes nearby.

A further finding comes from an examination of the camps used by Yemeni government forces before the Houthi takeover. Compared with the August imagery, by late October the camps appear largely empty of vehicles and weaponry, and the military presence previously visible

there has almost completely disappeared (Figure 2). This is consistent with the possibility that the forces evacuated the camps and most of their equipment prior to or during the takeover of the city, although it cannot be determined from the imagery alone whether this constituted an orderly withdrawal or a hasty evacuation.



Figure 2 – Withdrawal of Yemeni Government Forces

Concurrently, even after the Houthi takeover, no significant concentrations of new military vehicles were identified in the camps. This may indicate that the Houthis are not relying on an overt deployment of a large mechanized force inside the city, but primarily on ground forces,

roadblocks, control of intersections and entry points, and the fortifications built around Al-Mokha. However, the absence of vehicles in the imagery does not rule out the presence of forces and equipment that are not visible in the photographs.



Figure 3 – Incapacitation of Al-Mokha Airport Following an Airstrike

Satellite imagery findings also indicate significant damage to Al-Mokha's airport. Damage consistent with an aerial strike can be identified on the runway, and the airfield appears unfit for regular aviation operations. Amid Saudi airstrikes on Houthi targets along the western coast, two Saudi strikes on the airport were reported on September 12, 2026. The damage to the runway is still visible in the October 28 image, and there are no signs that the airport has returned to regular operations (Figure 3).

The damage to the airport carries operational significance for the forces controlling Al-Mokha. As long as the runway remains out of commission, the ability to transport troops, equipment, and supplies by air is limited, thereby increasing reliance on overland routes and coastal facilities. This may make it harder to reinforce forces in the city and sustain prolonged military activity there, especially if fighting resumes nearby.

Alongside the military changes, the satellite imagery points to a decline in civilian activity in the city compared to August. The image from late October shows fewer vehicles on the streets and in centers of activity, which may indicate a contraction in economic activity and the departure of some residents ahead of or following the Houthi takeover. However, it cannot be inferred from the imagery alone how many residents remain in the city or the exact scale of the exodus. The visible shift primarily reflects a disruption to daily life in Al-Mokha, coinciding with the military changes that took place there within a short timeframe.

Assessment and Implications

The findings as a whole indicate that the Houthis are not content with merely capturing Al-Mokha; they are working to establish a foothold that will enable them to withstand an attempt to retake the city. The system of trenches, earthen berms, and roadblocks built around the city is intended to impede the advance of attacking forces and enable the Houthis to monitor access routes, even without a large concentration of military vehicles within the urban area. The engineering effort in the south of the city is particularly notable, where a double fortification line has been built. This may reflect the Houthis' assessment that the main counteroffensive could come from this direction. Continued fortification work in this sector will therefore serve as one of the key indicators for understanding their military preparations.

Al-Mokha's significance is not limited to control of the city itself. Its location along the Red Sea coastal axis, near the Bab al-Mandab Strait, grants the Houthi foothold strategic significance even while the local airport remains incapacitated. The evacuation of the camps formerly used by government forces, the construction of the new defensive array, and the decline in civilian activity point to a marked shift in the local reality. It appears that the forces that previously held the city evacuated most of their compounds, while the Houthis are consolidating their control through roadblocks, ground forces, and an expanding network of fortifications, with no large deployment of mechanized assets visible in the imagery.

Going forward, it will be important to examine whether the trenches and earthen berms have been completed, whether additional military vehicles and weaponry have been brought into the city, and whether the volume of civilian and military traffic has changed. Monitoring these indicators will help assess the extent to which the Houthis have established their foothold in Al-Mokha and whether their current preparations are intended to support a prolonged hold on the city or to defend against an immediate threat of a counteroffensive. These findings, however, will need to be assessed alongside additional information regarding developments on the ground.

*** The satellite imagery, intelligence research, analysis, assessments, and findings presented in this article were prepared by ImageSat International (ISI) and its GEOIMPACT Intelligence Team.**

To the fullest extent permitted by applicable law, ISI shall not be liable for any loss or damage arising from reliance on the information presented.

All intellectual property rights in ISI's original analysis and intelligence products are reserved. Rights to underlying satellite imagery remain with their respective owners and licensors. No reproduction, redistribution, or other use is authorized except as permitted by applicable law or the relevant rights holders.

© ImageSat International (I.S.I) Ltd. All rights reserved.