



Weekly Yemen Political and Security Assessment

3-9 February 2017

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SAFER YEMEN For Sustainable Security

Shalamish area - Hadda, Sana'a - E-mail: contact@saferyemen.com - Phone: (+967) 737996999

Overall situation

There was no movement on the political track during the week as the focus remains squarely on the military situation. Since the start of the offensive along the western coastline last month the UN-led political process has become even more of a secondary concern for the warring Yemeni parties despite visits by the UN special envoy to their respective capitals.

With the sides holding firm to their incompatible conditions there seems to be little chance for the UN-led talks to resume in the short term. The sides will instead maintain their focus on pursuing gains militarily. Meanwhile, international pressure for a peaceful resolution to the conflict also seems to have decreased as attention has instead shifted to speculation about the possibility of a deeper US role in the conflict amid rising regional tensions.

On the military front, the battle for Al-Mokha remained the focus. Fierce fighting in the town is entering its third week as coalition-backed forces press to capture the port town from Houthi-affiliated fighters. Coalition-backed forces launched sustained assaults on two fronts, edging closer to the town centre and entering the sea port, forcing pro-Houthi groups to withdraw to the town's northern edges. In support of the ground fighting, coalition jets continue to pound the town and surrounding areas.

As the hostilities escalate, there are growing concerns over the local population, with daily reports of civilian casualties. All parties have reportedly targeted residential areas, destroying houses, markets and other infrastructure with artillery shelling, rocket fire and airstrikes. Between 3,500 and 7,000 people are reportedly still residing in Al-Mokha, trapped by the fighting. Humanitarian organisations are struggling to access these affected areas.

The other northern frontlines were largely static as the focus has shifted to the battle for Al-Mokha, with the exception of Hajja, which has seen fierce confrontations for the past two weeks. As hostilities continue to break out along the border, pro-Houthi media reported the launch of a new ballistic missile, which they claim hit a military camp in Riyadh province, though there has been no corroboration from the Saudi side, nor the usual retaliation.

Meanwhile, in Abyan, local groups began to push back against the expansion of AQAP. Tribal militias filled the vacuum left by the withdrawal of security belt forces, pushing militants out of the towns of Lawdar and Shoqra. However, clashes are ongoing in the governorate, and without external support it is unlikely that local groups alone will be able counter the groups spread.

As the conflict continues, the UN launched an appeal for \$2.1 billion to address the worsening humanitarian situation. The UN's humanitarian chief said Yemen is one of the most food insecure countries in the world, with more than 17.1 million people food insecure and 7.3 million people not knowing where their next meal will come from. He also warned that famine is now a possibility for 2017 unless there is immediate action.

Political situation

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Military track remains predominant

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The latest flare-up in hostilities has, for the time being, ended any prospect of the parties agreeing to the ceasefire that the UN envoy has been pursuing as the first step to further peace talks. While there is the prospect of coalition-backed forces making further military gains in the west of the country they will not agree to another truce, no matter how temporary. And, so far, the UN envoy has been unable to bring the parties together for direct talks without a ceasefire deal as a first step and sign of good faith.

As the fighting drags on, time is running out on Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed's term as the UN special envoy, which expires in April. It is unclear what will happen after that, with the peace process he has been leading having made little tangible progress, a new SG in place and the envoy enjoying an at-times rocky relationship with the warring parties. Currently, the prospect of any significant breakthrough before then looks unlikely.

Since the envoy first floated the latest version of his roadmap last year the Hadi administration's position has hardened. In the most recent meetings with the UN envoy the government has flatly rejecting the plan in its current form. Their stance is that the roadmap does not conform to the 'three references' – UNSC resolution 2216, the NDC outcomes and the GCC initiative – and that Hadi must remain president to oversee any transition leading to new elections, rather than be replaced by a consensus vice-president overseeing a power-sharing administration as currently proposed.

On the other side, the Houthi/GPC delegates have, since November, expressed a willingness to engage in negotiations on the basis of the UN envoy's roadmap, accepting the plan in principle. But, they have failed to present a detailed plan on how they would implement the sequenced withdrawal and weapons hand-over required of them in the proposal. To overcome the impasse, the envoy may present an amended roadmap in the coming period. However, with the sides holding firm to their incompatible conditions there seems to be little chance for the UN-led talks to resume in the short term. The sides will instead maintain their focus on pursuing gains militarily.

Saudis release video of naval attack

The reporting period also saw further fallout from last week's events that threatened to further expand the theatre of conflict. Following on from the conflicting accounts of the Houthi attack on a Saudi frigate on 30 January, Saudi media released a video on 5 February reportedly when the naval vessel was hit. The footage is taken from the frigate's air operations observation platform overlooking the helicopter pad on the rear of the ship, where the vessel was struck. The footage shows a fast-moving object, according to Saudi officials a small boat, colliding with the vessel.

From the footage, it is unclear whether the object was manned or guided, but a suicide attack does not fit with Houthi tactics to date and is assessed as unlikely. As such, it may have been a waterborne improvised explosive device (WBIED) that hit the Saudi frigate. This has led to claims the attack is further proof of Iranian support for the Houthis, as Iran has previously demonstrated a similar capability.

Following the attack on the Saudi warship and amid heightened tension between Washington and Tehran, the US moved a Navy destroyer to off the coast of Yemen, reportedly to protect international waterways. The USS Cole arrived near the Bab Al-Mandab Strait off southwestern Taiz on 3 February, where it will carry out patrols, including escorting vessels. Seventeen US military personnel were killed aboard the USS Cole in an attack in the port city of Aden in October 2000 claimed by Al-Qaeda.

Two amphibious warfare ships, the USS Comstock and the USS Makin Island, are also deployed in the same area as the Cole. The Makin Island was involved in the 29 January US commando raid in Yemen that led to the deaths of a Navy SEAL and multiple civilians. Last October, the US navy also launched cruise missile strikes on three coastal radar sites, retaliating after reported failed missile attacks on another US destroyer.

The latest deployment comes as President Trump said on 2 February that "nothing is off the table" in dealing with Iran, a day after his national security adviser, Michael Flynn, said he was putting Iran "on notice". Flynn cited the Houthi attack on the Saudi warship as an example of Iran's regional aggression, blaming Tehran for the Houthis' actions against US, Saudi and Emirati forces. This is leading to reports of a potential greater US engagement in the Yemen conflict, both through a higher tempo of counter-terrorism operations as well as in actively supporting the Saudi-led coalition, as the administration uses Yemen to flex its muscles towards Iran without directly engaging.

More questions about US raid

As speculation grows about the possibility of a deeper US role in the conflict, there seem to be concerns on all sides about what this may entail. *The New York Times* reported on 8 February that the Hadi government had withdrawn permission for the US to carry out counter-terrorism ground operations in Yemen due to anger over civilian casualties in last week's raid.

However, the report was quickly denied by Hadi's foreign minister. Abdul-Malik Al-Mekhlafi said the government had only asked for a "reassessment" of the raid and that the administration will continue to cooperate with the US and abide by all agreements. This was supported by further statements from administration officials that although they had expressed reservations about the operation they had no suspended any programmes with the US.

A statement by the Yemeni embassy in Washington said the government "reiterates its firm position that any counterterrorism operations carried out in Yemen should continue to be in consultation with Yemeni authorities and have precautionary measures to prevent civilian casualties".

Hadi government officials expressed outrage last week at the operation, both for the civilian deaths, but also reportedly because the government had not been fully consulted prior to the mission; members of the Houthi/GPC ruling councils in Sana'a also denounced the operation as a violation of Yemeni sovereignty. Al-Mekhlafi called the raid "extrajudicial killings", while President Hadi and the ambassador to the US, Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, reportedly raised concerns about the raid with the American ambassador.

However, Hadi government officials have also expressed support for the new US administration's initial approach to the situation in Yemen. In an interview with Al-Jazeera on 7 February, Bin Mubarak said the Trump administration is approaching the conflict from an "entirely different" perspective than the Obama White House. He said that President Trump takes the Iranian presence more seriously, welcoming the recent comments from General Flynn as well as the deployment of the Cole. On the same day, Hadi's ambassador to the UN, Khaled Hussein Al-Yemani, claimed that the US may classify the Houthis as a terrorist organisation and that it would take steps to confront Iran over arm shipments to Yemen.

"Which side are you on?"

The US raid in Al-Bayda also continued to draw international attention. The Pentagon belatedly acknowledged that there were several civilian casualties in the attack, including children, but said they were still assessing the final death toll. Local reports said seven women and nine children were killed in the raid. However, the Trump administration has spent the week defending the operation, characterising the mission as a success due to the valuable intelligence reportedly acquired as well as denying reports that the actual target of the mission was AQAP leader Qasim Al-Raymi.

Local reports have also brought into question the intelligence gathering claims, disputing that special operations troops entered any of the buildings in the village. This comes on top of the disastrous release of videos supposedly collected in the raid, but which have been publicly available for almost a decade.

In response to the raid, Al-Raymi released a rare 11-minute audio message on 4 February, in which he confirmed the death of 14 militants. He claimed it showed America's "true ugly face", adding that the outcome of the raid is a slap in the face of President Trump and calling for attacks on the US. He also framed the operation as proof that the US is working with the Houthis, using the incident to stress AQAP's role in protecting Yemen's Sunni population.

As well as providing material for Al-Qaeda propaganda, the raid may also have been a setback for the Hadi government and its coalition backers. The anger from the Hadi government over the operation seems to have stemmed not only from the lack of coordination, but also from the fact that the tribal sheikhs killed in the raid were also leading local militias fighting against pro-Houthi forces in Al-Bayda.

Reportedly, Abdulrauf Al-Dhabab had just returned from Marib, where he had travelled to collect money from coalition-backed officials to pay the salaries of local anti-Houthi fighters. However, as well as fighting against the Houthis and their allies, Al-Dhabab and the other two tribal leaders killed in the raid reportedly had connections with AQAP. The strength of these connections is debated, but after his death AQAP commemorated Al-Dhabab through its media channels, calling him a "holy warrior".

The raid highlights an issue for the Hadi government and the coalition, which is being backed by the US, but is in turn supporting an array of groups that are tenuously aligned under the shared objective of opposing the Houthis, but which otherwise have very differing goals, not least AQAP. This may become more challenging if the Trump administration does follow-through on ramping up its operations in Yemen, which would include both carrying out counter-terrorism actions against AQAP and supporting the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention against the Houthis and their allies.

Launch of 2017 humanitarian response plan

The UN appealed on 8 February for \$2.1 billion as it launched the 2017 Yemen Humanitarian Response Plan (YHRP), the largest consolidated humanitarian appeal for Yemen ever launched. This is up from last year's call for \$1.8 billion, which was only 60 per cent funded by year end. The UN's humanitarian chief said Yemen is one of the most food insecure countries in the world, with more than 17.1 million people food insecure and 7.3 million people not knowing where their next meal will come from. He also warned that famine is now a possibility for 2017 unless there is immediate action.

Activities in this year's plan include emergency food assistance for 8 million people, medical support for nearly 6 million people; treatment of acute malnutrition for 2.6 million women and children; emergency shelter or essential items for 1.9 million people; and direct delivery of emergency water and sanitation to 1.4 million people.

Focusing on specific sector, Dr Rick Brennan, director of WHO Emergency Operations, warned that the health system in Yemen is "on its knees right now and highly dependent on international support". Currently, more than 14.1 million people lack access to basic health care; less than 45 per cent of health facilities are still functioning; at least 274 of those facilities have been damaged or destroyed in the current conflict; medical supplies are in chronic shortage; and healthcare workers have not received salaries for about six months.

He also said that beyond the direct casualties of the armed conflict, many people are dying of malnutrition and diseases that are easily preventable and treatable. People with chronic diseases, including high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney conditions, are slowly dying as they lack access to life-sustaining treatments.

Economic situation

The Yemen embassy in Washington, DC issued reports on developments in the political and economic situation in Yemen. The reports place the blame for the current situation squarely on the Houthis and their allies, dismissing reports that the bank's move has had a negative impact on the country's economy explaining how the Hadi government has taken steps to mitigate the disastrous consequences of their actions.

The relocation of the central bank to Aden is justified by the economic mismanagement by the Houthi authorities in Sana'a, who are accused of draining the country's reserves. The new bank management will reportedly address the situation in the short-term by injecting new banknotes into the system, paying outstanding public-sector salaries, seeking external grants to replenish reserves and introduce measures to counter inflation.

The report says the CBY in Aden has been working on security payroll data from across the country, based on 2014 figures, and including areas under the control of the Houthis and their allies. Despite "obstructions" from the other side, the CBY reportedly released the first tranche of salaries to public-sector workers in the education sector in January. Further payments will reportedly be made once the bank receives further shipments of new banknotes.

The embassy also says that although the CBY is still subsidising the foreign exchange rate for wheat and rice imports these are the only remaining imports for which the bank can afford to do so. The bank's net reserves have fallen below \$600 million and its external current accounts have dropped to only \$15 million, meaning the CBY has been unable to settle letters of credit. As of September 2016, when the bank was moved to Aden, more than \$85 million in letters of credit had not been settled by the CBY

The bank permits commercial banks to open letters of credit for wheat and rice traders at the subsidised exchange rate of YER250-\$1; this remains the official rate, but in exchange shops it reached as high as YER350-\$1 this week. Commercial banks are subsequently reimbursed for the difference in the foreign exchange rate obtained from the private market. But, due to the depletion of the bank's reserves it is unable to reimburse commercial banks; many of the CBY's external accounts have also been suspended since 2015 due to these balance issues.

According to the embassy, an immediate injection of funds from an external donor is required to continue with the remaining food import subsidies (despite propping up the Hadi government, coalition members have been reticent to inject funds into the CBY, even after the move to Aden, over concerns about the administration's previous financial mismanagement and political rivalries between the various factions).

Security situation

Fierce fighting continued throughout the week in Al-Mokha. Coalition-backed forces attacked on two fronts, having established positions in the town's eastern and southern outskirts, but Houthi-affiliated forces have stubbornly held their ground in the north and to the west for the past three weeks. As anti-Houthi fighters launched daily assaults they gradually edged closer to the town centre and entered the sea port, forcing pro-Houthi groups to withdraw to the town's northern edges. In support of the ground fighting, coalition jets pounded the town and surrounding areas as attempted to dislodge pro-Houthi fighters.

As the hostilities escalate, there are growing concerns over the local population, with daily reports of civilian casualties. All parties have reportedly targeted residential areas, destroying houses, markets and other infrastructure with artillery shelling, rocket fire and airstrikes. Between 3,500 and 7,000 people are reportedly still residing in Al-Mokha, trapped by the fighting. Humanitarian organisations are struggling to access these affected areas.

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Fighting grinds on in Mokha

Almost three weeks after declaring the capture of Al-Mokha heavy confrontations over the port town are still ongoing, but coalition-backed forces have managed to gradually push pro-Houthi fighters to the northern edges of the town. Anti-Houthi forces launched attacks on two fronts, having established positions in the eastern and southern outskirts, with Houthi-affiliated forces stubbornly holding their ground in the north and to the west. Throughout the week, the fierce street fighting was focused mainly around the centre of the town and the seaport to the south-west.

The coalition-backed forces' assaults on the town centre and the sea port area saw them make steady progress, but for most of the week they failed to hold captured ground in the face of intensive fire from pro-Houthi fighters. They, reportedly, though entered the port facility on 9 February after forcing the Houthi-affiliated forces to withdraw to the north. However, armed confrontations are expected to continue in the coming week as the sides grapple for control of the port town. Pro-Houthi fighters will attempt to roll back these gains, while coalition-backed forces will continue to push to retake the rest of the town.

In support of the ground fighting coalition jets pounded Al-Mokha as they try to dislodge Houthi-affiliated fighters as well as cut-off routes to the north and east. Neighbourhoods in the north and west of the town, where pro-Houthi forces are holed-up, have seen especially heavy bombardment. As the hostilities escalate, there are growing concerns over the local population. All parties have reportedly targeted residential areas, destroying houses, markets and other civilian infrastructure with artillery shelling, rocket fire and airstrikes.

According to UNOCHA, as of 5 February, between 3,500 and 7,000 people are still residing in Al-Mokha, trapped by the fighting, with reports of sniper fire at the town's entrances and heavily-mined routes. Health facilities are not functioning, shops and markets are open for limited hours, and the water network operates sporadically due to lack of fuel and damage sustained to the main pumping station.

In the wider governate, the UN estimates that more than 34,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, with some 60 per cent of the recent IDPs fleeing areas affected by fighting in Dhubab and Al-Mokha. Humanitarian organisations are struggling to access these affected areas due to the fierce fighting.

Coalition airstrikes also continued to target routes leading to the frontlines in Al-Mokha, hitting sites along the main roads to the north, east and south of the town. The Al-Mokha junction-Khalid bin Al-Walid military camp area to the east has seen particularly heavy bombing, while ground fighting is also ongoing in neighbouring Maqbanah and Mawza as the warring parties compete for control of the main roads.

Although the coalition-backed military operation in western Taiz has reached Al-Mokha, their lines continue to be harassed by Houthi-affiliated forces along the coast from Bab al-Mandab to northern Dhubab. Fierce fighting is still breaking out along the main coastal road, especially the mountainous Al-Omary area, which remains under the control of pro-Houthi fighters. The area has been blitzed by coalition aircraft, but they have been unable to shift them.

In the southern districts, armed clashes are ongoing in Al-Silw, Hayfan and Al-Wazi'iyah. Houthi-affiliated forces made slight gains on these fronts in recent weeks, but the fighting continues to go back-and-forth between the sides. Meanwhile, hostilities have slowed in Taiz city. Intermittent shelling, rocket fire and armed clashes are still reported, but at a lower level than last month as forces have been redeployed to the western coast.

Violence escalates in Abyan

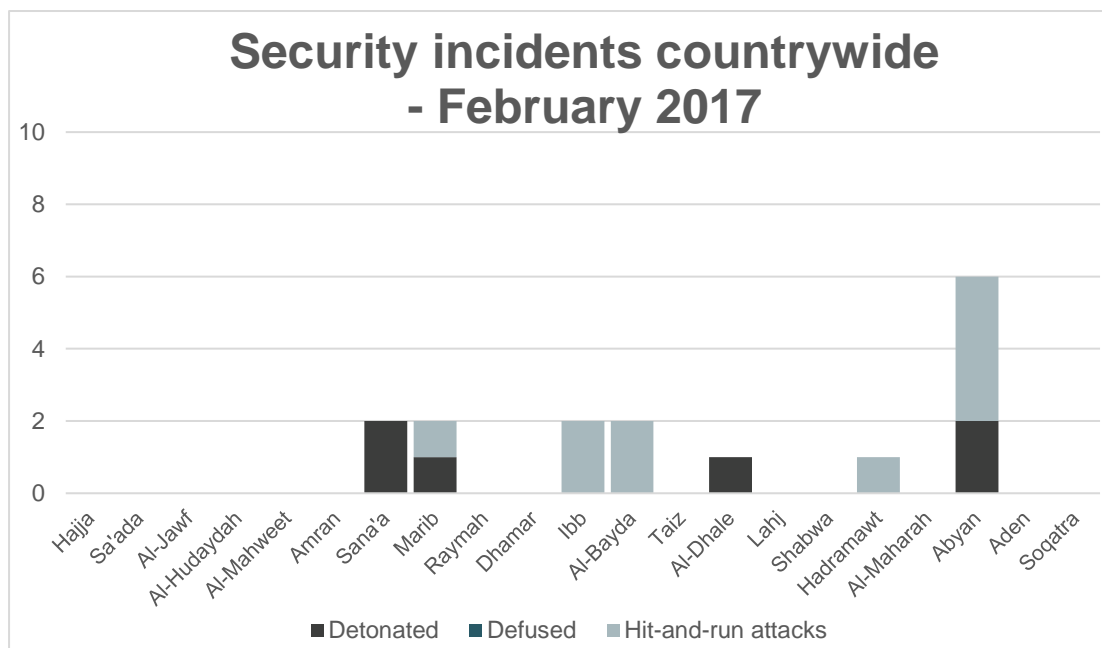
As reported last week, AQAP militants began re-deploying inside most districts in Abyan from 2 February, publicly establishing their presence through setting-up checkpoints and blowing up security buildings. The group exploited the vacuum left by the withdrawal of security belt forces, over the non-payment of salaries and the lack of support, in Ahwar, Al-Mudiyah, Al-Mahfad, Al-Wade'a, Lawdar and Khanfir. Following these developments, the local security chief, Abdullah Al-Fadhli resigned on 4 February, citing disagreements with coalition members over their lack of support; leaders of the security belt forces previously called for Al-Fadhli's resignation on 18 January.

However, after an initial bloodless expansion, local groups began to push back. According to the latest reports, militants were pushed out of the towns of Shoqra and Lawdar after residents took up arms against them. Clashes have been reported in both areas, with locals imposing a curfew in the later from 5 February and setting up checkpoints at the town's entrances. Tribesmen also ambushed militants in Mudiydah and parts of Lawdar, reportedly killing several AQAP fighters.

Military units, up to four battalions, are reportedly mobilising in the Al-Arqub mountains and Shoqra ahead of an operation to clear AQAP militants from the governorate. There have also been unconfirmed reports of airstrikes targeting the militants in Lawdar and other districts. Such attacks last week were attributed by local reporting to US naval vessels in the gulf, but this was quickly denied by US military officials. None of the coalition members claimed to have conducted any air raids in Abyan. They have also been largely silent on AQAP's re-emergence in the governorate.

As the group's activities increased in Abyan, AQAP also claimed attacks on pro-Houthi forces in Ibb and Al-Bayda, reportedly assassinating a pro-Houthi commander near Al-Makhadir in central Ibb and near the Al-Dhale border on 5 February. According to the SITE Intelligence Group, in the 20 days up to 6 February, AQAP claimed 23 attacks on pro-Houthi and security belt forces in Abyan, Al-Bayda and Ibb.

But, as the focus in Abyan shifted to AQAP, Houthi-affiliated forces also attempted to exploit the situation. They launched an assault on Aqabat Thurah mountain on 6 February, deploying forces from Mukayras in southern Al-Bayda under the cover of dense fog. Their attack, though, was repelled by southern resistance and local groups. The mountain, which overlooks Lawdar town, has been the site of regular clashes since pro-Houthi forces were pushed out of Abyan as it is a strategic site between the two governorates.



Clashes along the Saudi border

Armed confrontations on the northern frontlines were again concentrated in north-western Hajja. Anti-Houthi groups, supported by coalition aircraft, engaged in daily clashes with pro-Houthi fighters around the town of Midi and along the Saudi border. The area has seen intensive confrontations for the past couple of weeks, but, despite the ongoing clashes, neither side has made any progress. The situation has remained largely unchanged since anti-Houthi forces re-took Midi port last year. They control a pocket of territory around the port and the near the Al-Tawal border crossing in neighbouring Harad, but have failed to push out into the rest of the governorate which remains under the control of Houthi-affiliated forces.

Hostilities also continued along the Yemen-Saudi border. Of note, pro-Houthi media reported the launch of a new ballistic missile, the 'Burkan-2', on 5 February, which they claim hit the Muzahimiyah military camp in Riyadh province in central Saudi Arabia and threatened further attacks on the area; the camp is roughly 66km west of the Saudi capital. The incident has only been reported in Houthi media and there has been no corroboration from any other sources or comment from the Saudi side. There has also been no subsequent retaliation, which is has been the typical immediate response to any such incident.

Houthi-affiliated forces have carried out a steady stream of cross-border attacks into the south of Saudi Arabia as a means to inflict costs on the coalition for their military intervention. This has included regular launches of ballistic missiles, including converted Scud missiles, the latest version of which the media claim has a range of 1,200km. The Saudi military last year said it had intercepted 36 missiles since the start of the conflict.

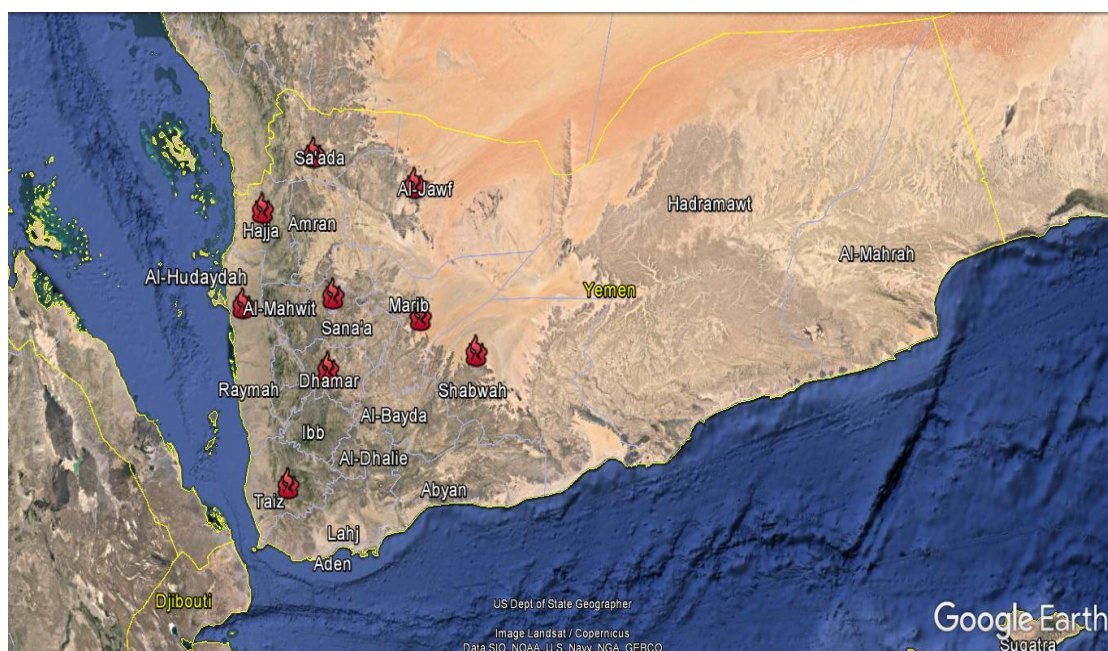
Heavy bombing on Al-Hudaydah

Similarly, the situation was also unchanged across other fronts in the north (see Annex A for a summary of incidents during the reporting period). Armed confrontations continued at a steady rate in Al-Jawf, Marib and Niham, with the latter seeing the heaviest fighting, while coalition bombing hit sites in these contested areas as well as in Sa'ada, Sana'a, Dhamar, Al-Mahweet and Al-Hudaydah (see Annex C for a list of locations hit by coalition airstrikes in the past week).

Most notably, the blitz on Al-Hudaydah continued following the 30 January attack on a Saudi warship by pro-Houthi fighters. The intensity of the airstrikes on the governorate has spiked since the incidents, mainly targeting military sites, but also hitting infrastructure and civilian areas as well. This includes reportedly striking fishing boats on 1, 3 and 8 February, killing at least eight people. The coming period is likely to see a continuation of this heavy bombardment on the governorate.

The recent trend of targeting transport routes also continued in the reporting period. Strikes hit the Al-Hanakah bridge in north-western Al-Mahweet on 6 February. The bridge is on the Al-Hudaydah to Sana'a road, though it is reportedly still passable. Strikes also reportedly targeted construction equipment being transported on the Dhamar-Al-Husayniyah road in Wisab Al-Safil in western Dhamar on 7 February, killing one person and injuring another. The coalition has previously targeted larger vehicles as well as convoys, likely mistaking them for movements of Houthi-affiliated forces. The route in this incident leads towards the hotspots in western Taiz.

Map of airstrikes countrywide (3-9 February)



Situation in Aden

The situation in Aden was unchanged. Daily protests continued over unpaid wages, with soldiers and public- and private-sector workers staging demonstrations and blocking roads in neighbourhoods across the city. These protests are set to continue throughout the coming weeks as the Hadi government remains unable to pay salaries for any, but a few, of the affected sectors, despite the repeated promises over the past month that the payments have been paid to all public-sector groups.

The city also continued to be affected by the fuel shortage, which is entering its fourth week, leading to periodic electricity cuts. The shortages come on top of the already highly-limited public services, and, as with the salary issue, there are no indications that the authorities have the means, and in some cases the interest, to address the issue as resources remain primarily dedicated to the ongoing conflict.

There were reports that the Hadi government approved a reduction in custom duties at the city's ports to stimulate commercial activity. This comes as Aden is expected to receive increased traffic due to the escalated hostilities in Al-Hudaydah, which had been serving as the main entrance point for most goods. International shipping firms are reportedly taking steps to re-route traffic to the port, as well as reports that some humanitarian agencies are also considering a similar move. However, the issue over the onward movement of supplies remains a concern, especially transporting goods through contested areas that separate the north from southern areas.

Aden also saw a steady rate of small-scale security incidents, but recent weeks have been quieter than the first month of the year. The counter-terrorism unit claimed to have arrested IS and AQAP militants during raids in Ash Sheikh Othman and Al-Mansura on 3-4 February. The militants were reportedly responsible for recent carrying out assassinations and attacks on the security forces in the city in recent months. However, the security forces have regularly announced such arrests, but this has had, at best, a temporary impact on the capacity of such groups to carry out attacks.

These dynamics in Aden are unlikely to change in the short term as local, national and regional factions compete for resources and influence amid the fluid political dynamics that are underlying the unsettled situation in Aden and other southern areas.

Anticipated developments

The overall situation is unchanged from last week. The prospects for another ceasefire look dim as the fighting escalates in Al-Mokha and tensions rise between the belligerents along the west coast. With coalition-backed forces making military gains along the Taiz coastline there is no short-term incentive for them to halt the fighting, and the greater likelihood is for hostilities to escalate in the coming period.

Coalition-backed forces will continue their push to capture Al-Mokha, with heavy fighting expected in the town and surrounding areas, as well as airstrikes targeting roads further up the coastline and towards the centre of Taiz. As their offensive progresses, they will likely try to press past the town to secure these main routes to Al-Hudaydah and Taiz city.

As they previously warned, Houthi-affiliated forces responded to the ongoing clashes in Taiz by carrying out attacks on coalition vessels, and further such attacks may be forthcoming, targeting military vessels off the Yemeni coast, possibly as well as supply vessels for coalition forces. They will also likely conduct further ballistic missile launches into Saudi territory and targeting coalition-backed forces in Yemen. The coalition has previously responded to such developments with intensive aerial bombardments of areas in the north of the country. A particular focus may be Al-Hudaydah, which the coalition has warned about targeting in response to Houthi attacks, potentially affecting operations at the ports.

In the meantime, the steady rate of confrontations and coalition air raids along the other well-established frontlines will continue, along with bombing on non-conflict areas, including the capital Sana'a. The economic situation will continue to deteriorate across the country. The Riyal continued to lose value in unofficial markets, rising as high as YER350-\$1 in some foreign exchanges. There is also the risk of the increasingly volatile political dynamics, local, national and regional, manifesting as security incidents as well as significant economic and political developments, especially in southern areas, where the context is increasingly volatile.

Behind the frontlines, groups such as AQAP will continue to exploit the political and security vacuum. They will attempt to expand their presence in Abyan, leading to confrontations with local groups, as well as continuing to embed themselves with local groups fighting against Houthi-affiliated forces in central governorates.

Situation in Sana'a

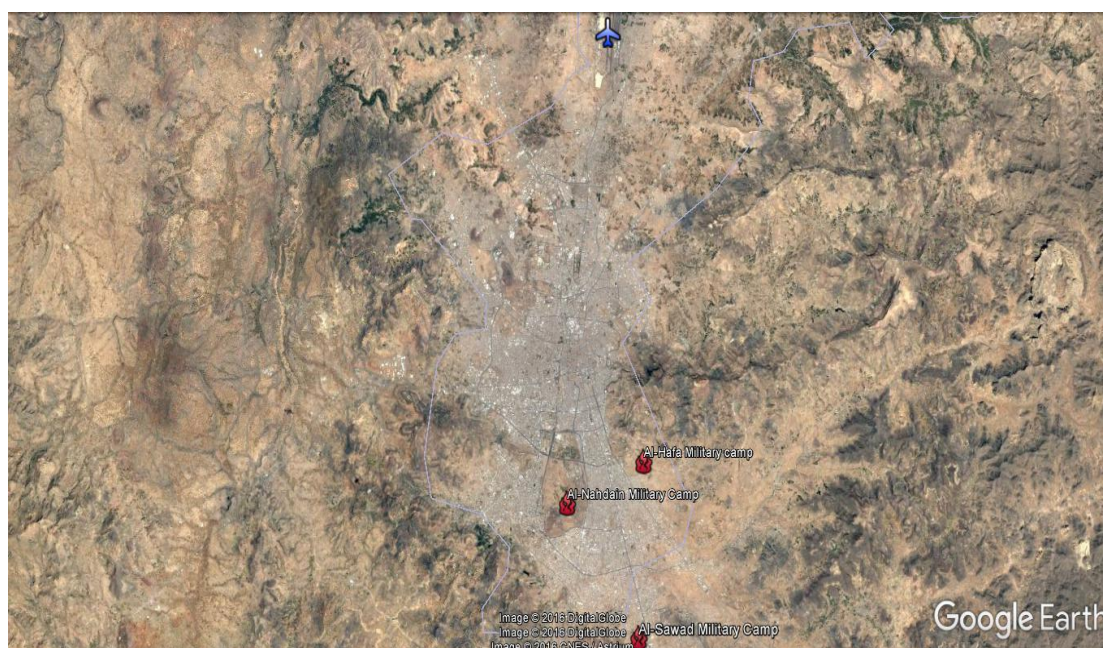
The overall situation in Sana'a was unchanged from previous weeks, but the city saw an uptick in coalition airstrikes after a relative lull last week. In addition to the air raids, coalition jets also continued to carry out daily low-level sorties over the city and bombing frequently-targeted military sites on the outskirts. As with recent months the situation on the ground in the capital was calm, though there were several low-level incidents.

In the wider governorate, hostilities continued in contested Nihm district, but the frontlines were largely static as anti-Houthi forces failed to breach the defensive positions of Houthi-affiliated fighters. A steady rate of coalition bombing also continued in the wider governorate.

After a lull in airstrikes on the capital, coalition aircraft resumed bombing the city on 3 February. The strikes hit frequently-targeted military sites in the south of Sana'a on 3 and 4 February, though no casualties were reported in any of the air raids. The Al-Hafa camp in Al-Sab'ein was targeted on both days along with another military camp on the nearby Al-Nahdain mountain (see the map below of the locations of the airstrikes).

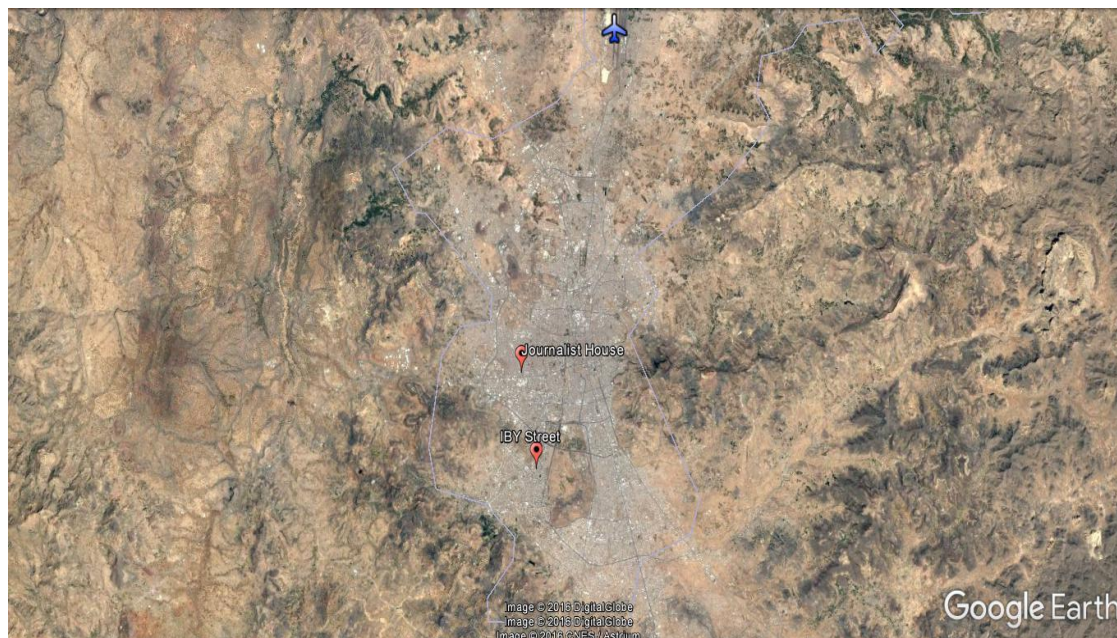
It is also worth noting that this shifting intensity in the coalition's bombing has been a feature of its air campaign, and there remains an ever-present risk of an imminent spike in spike in airstrikes. Such shifts are often in response to wider developments, including such as those on the western coast in recent week, as well as events on the frontlines in various governorates, missile and other attacks into Saudi territory, and shifts in the fluid local, national and regional political dynamics (see the risk forecast below).

Map of airstrikes in Sana'a city (3-9 February)



Despite the resumption of the air raids, the city remained quiet. On the ground, as has been the recent trend, the security situation was calm, though there were a couple of incidents (see the map below). Armed men on a motorcycle reportedly threw a hand grenade at the house of a journalist on Hayl Street in Ma'ain on 7 February, and a small explosion was reported on the IBY street in Hadda on 8 February, damaging a dustbin; it is unclear what caused the latter incident. There were no casualties in either incident.

Map of security incidents in Sana'a city (3-9 February)



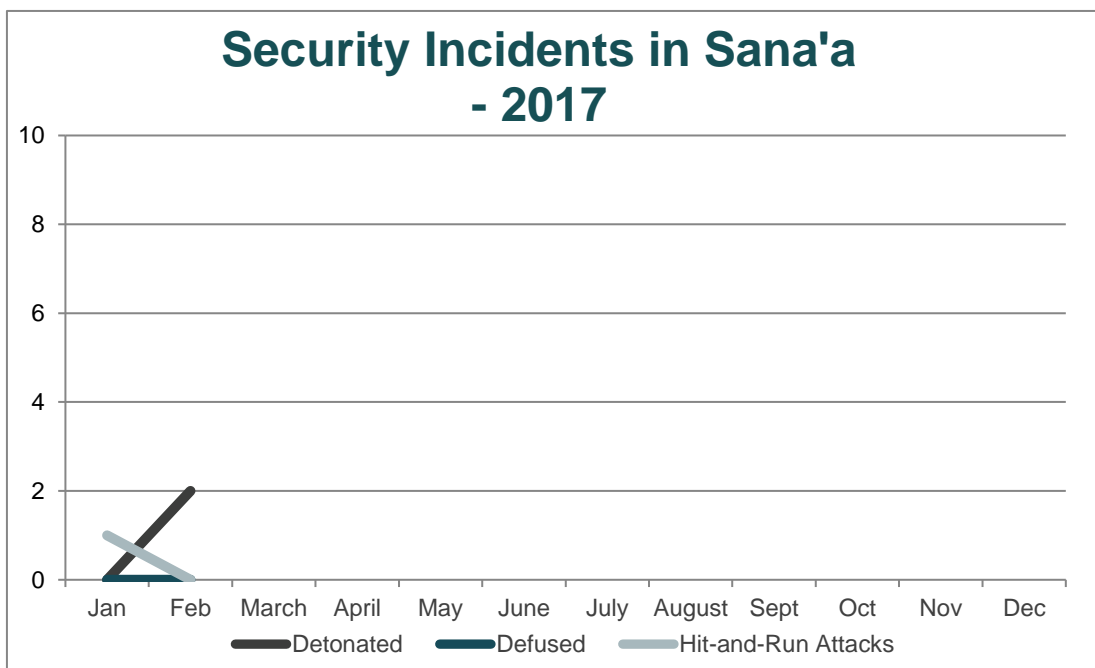
There has been a very low level of security incidents in Sana'a for most of the past year and this has continued into 2017 (see the chart below). It is not expected that this will suddenly change as the city remains firmly under the control of Houthi- and Saleh-affiliated forces, though there may be a number of small-scale, localised incidents such as the two this week. However, although the recent trend of incidents has been at a low level, various groups retain the intent to carry out incidents to destabilise the situation in the capital, including armed attacks and kidnapping.

We also reiterate that there has been a steady rise in reports of theft and robbery incidents taking place in Sana'a city, including stolen cars batteries, pickpocketing and robberies outside banks and money exchange shops. These incidents have been isolated and at a very low level, but are on the increase. All organisations should ensure that sufficient security procedures are in place and followed by all members of staff.

In the wider Sana'a governorate, hostilities continued in Nihm district throughout the week. Anti-Houthi groups, supported by coalition aircraft, attacked the positions of Houthi-affiliated forces in the Hareeb Nihm and Milh areas, but were rebuffed. In response, pro-Houthi fighters fired rockets and artillery shells at opposition sites. Despite the steady rate of clashes, neither side has made any significant progress in the district. Nihm also saw daily coalition bombing.

There was a low level of bombing on other districts in the governorate. Airstrikes hit the Al-Sawad camp to the south of the capital in Sanhan, a regular target, as well as the Jaref public baths and resort in the Bab Al-Fawarah area of Bilad Al-Rus; there were no reported casualties in either incident. Also of note, the Al-Hanakah bridge in north-western Al-Mahweet was bombed on 6 February. The bridge is on the Sana'a-Al-Hudaydah road, though it is reportedly still passable.

As noted above, the targeting of transport infrastructure has been a feature of the coalition's air campaign across most northern governorates. Such trends are likely to continue as the coalition targets movements of pro-Houthi reinforcements as well as supply lines to the conflict areas, despite the risk of potential civilian casualties and the impact on the movement of basic goods. Routes to Al-Hudaydah and Taiz are likely to particularly at risk, given the escalating hostilities along the western coastline.



Risk forecast for Sana'a

- The risk of **indirect exposure to airstrikes** remains at a relatively high level as the Saudi-led coalition is carrying out sporadic rounds of bombing on the city. The targeting pattern for the strikes is expected to remain unchanged, mainly hitting military sites. However, as seen throughout the coalition's air campaign, the targeting of civilian infrastructure and residential neighbourhoods continues to shape the risk.
- There is assessed to be a low risk of small-scale, localised **armed conflict** in the city. Fighting is ongoing in the wider Sana'a governorate and surrounding areas. Progress, though, has been limited, and ground fighting is not expected to suddenly break out in the city without any prior indications.

- The risk of **indirect exposure to terrorist attacks and IEDs** is at a medium level, with the potential to increase depending on political/security developments. The rate of incidents has been at a relatively low level for much of the year (see the chart above), but the risk tends to be driven by wider events. These may manifest as political spoiling or destabilisation in the coming period as actors seek to break the military and political stalemate.
- The risk of **indirect exposure to small arms fire** is anticipated to remain at a medium level, mainly limited to isolated and small-scale incidents.
- The risk of **terrorist attacks targeting the international community** has the potential to increase as part of potential spoiling and/or destabilisation in relation to political developments and the wider context.
- The risk of **political kidnapping** is assessed to be at a medium level, but it has the potential to increase as political dynamics remain fluid, creating an incentive for various groups and figures to engage in spoiling/destabilisation through direct targeting of internationals. With the degradation of the security forces and the ensuing security vacuum there is space for various armed groups to operate; however, the capacity of some of these actors to transfer and hold victims might be restricted due to the on-going armed conflict.
- The risk of **tribal/criminal kidnapping** remains at a medium level in the current context, for both national and international staff, though the state security forces continue to operate with a restricted capacity in Sana'a, increasing space for groups to operate. However, the capacity to hold victims might be restricted due to the on-going armed conflict in most governorates. It should be noted that the risk of kidnappings may increase given the current severe humanitarian and economic crisis. All organisations should remind staff to follow security procedures.
- The risk of **detention of staff and other forms of harassment/intimidation** of international organisations is high, for both international and national staff. In the current tense and suspicious operating environment there is increased scrutiny of all organisations and personnel by the various authorities inside and outside the country, who may seek to harass, investigate or control the behaviour of international organisations. This includes a potential for the detention of staff, both international and national, in particular over bureaucratic issues, such as alleged visa problems.
- The risk of **sabotage of infrastructure** remains high due to airstrikes targeting infrastructure in and around Sana'a, including roads and bridges, limiting potential evacuation routes. Furthermore, the continued shortage of fuel, and resulting high prices, has resulted in the restricted capacity of healthcare facilities, communication, water and other fuel-demanding infrastructure. In addition, as is currently the case, Sana'a airport is vulnerable to sudden closure, including UN flights, for political and military reasons (see Annex A for the latest flight information).

Advisory

The situation in Yemen is dynamic, with the potential for a sudden escalation in hostilities on both well-established and new fronts in the conflict. With political dynamics in flux there is also the potential for destabilisation and spoiling, which as well as security incidents could also manifest in significant economic and political developments. Organisations and in-country staff should prepare accordingly, including ensuring contingency planning is updated for both international and national staff.

The situation remains fluid and we recommend that all organisations continue to monitor the situation both inside and outside Sana'a and regularly assess risks in the city as well as for field offices. Although the conflict has been largely stalemated for months, there is the potential that actors may open new fronts in an attempt to break the deadlock. All organisations should ensure they have the necessary security measures and contingency plans in place in case the situation at a local or national level suddenly deteriorates, including for hibernation and evacuation routes, and they are updated based on the latest context.

Fighting is continuing on the well-established fronts in the conflict, along with bombing by the Saudi-led coalition on contested areas and away from the frontlines. As such, organisations are advised to be cautious if considering increasing international staffing levels as there are limited evacuation options should the situation suddenly deteriorate, especially as Sana'a airport is vulnerable to sudden closures due to political and security developments, including for UN flights (see Annex A for the latest flight information).

As the situation is extremely dynamic and has the potential to suddenly escalate, organisations are advised to maintain contingency planning at all levels, for both international and national staff. This includes ensuring that hibernation supplies, including food and water for a minimum two-week period, alternative means of communication and fuel reserves for relocation, are in place at all times, and that alternative hibernation locations have been identified in different parts of the city.

In regard to national staff, organisations are advised to communicate regularly and clearly with national staff and address their concerns, e.g. through regular briefings/staff meetings. Also, to consider what contingency plans and security measures could be taken to support national staff, including staying informed about any plans for staff to relocate in the event of a deterioration in the situation and how the organisation can support such efforts, such as through ensuring salaries are paid in a timely fashion or up-front.

As the conflict drags on, there is also increasing fragmentation at a local level, with infighting and competition between groups over revenues, resources and territorial control. This is likely to worsen as the economic situation continues to deteriorate. There have already been reports of an increase in crime, including robbery, carjacking, extortion and intimidation, both in the main cities as well as in rural areas.

Staff are advised to be always be vigilant, to avoid being in banks late at night and to stay away from isolated areas, as well as to not keep valuables visible. Organisations should also ensure that guards and drivers are engaged in counter-surveillance and conduct regular security checks around compounds and to keep an eye on staff/agency vehicles if they are parked on the street.

In this current context, many organisations are also likely to experience significant barriers to their operations across the country, including access issues, bureaucratic challenges and general obstructionism, as well as pressure for payments to help alleviate these problems. This can include detention of staff, both national and international, by various authorities. This may be between, and within, the Houthi/GPC and Hadi administrations.

To mitigate these risks, it is advised that international organisations in Yemen strengthen inter-agency coordination and consider a collective approach to enhance access and acceptance for humanitarian operations, including dealing with increasingly de-centralised command structures and the proliferation of armed groups. It is also recommended to strengthen sharing of information about incidents and the situation at a local level, both within and across organisations.

Safer Yemen will continue to monitor the situation closely and will provide further details in the weekly report. Please do not hesitate to contact Safer Yemen for further information and advice related to planning of activities in the coming period.

Annex A. Summary of incidents for 3-9 February:

- Houthi-affiliated forces claimed to launch a 'Burkan-2' missile towards Riyadh province in Saudi Arabia on 5 February. Pro-Houthi media said the missile, likely a converted Scud, hit the Al-Muzahimiyah military camp, approximately 1,000km from the Yemen-Saudi border and some 66km west of Riyadh city, but there has been no corroboration from the Saudi side; the Saudi media has previously reported on the interception of ballistic missiles fired across the border. The new missile variant reportedly has a range of 1,400km.
- Pro-Houthi fighters also maintained a daily rate of attacks on Saudi military sites in Jizan, Asir and Najran provinces along the border.
- Heavy armed confrontations continued to break out in Midi district in north-western **Hajja**, but the frontlines around the port town and near the Saudi border were unchanged. Houthi-affiliated forces in the district were targeted by coalition aircraft, as well as in neighbouring Harad and Abs.
- As has been the trend in recent weeks, coalition bombing on **Sa'ada** continued at a relatively reduced level. Several rounds of air raids hit sites in Kitaf, Baqim, Al-Dhafer, Razih and Majz, but the intensity has decreased compared to previous months. The targets, though, were frequently non-military, including the Walibah school in Al-Dhafer, civilian vehicles and residential areas.
- The recent slowdown in hostilities also continued in **Al-Jawf**. Armed clashes were reported in Al-Maton, but the regularity of such confrontations, along with the intensity of airstrikes in the governorate, has fallen in recent weeks.
- The week, though, saw a slight uptick in confrontations in **Marib**. The warring groups exchanged artillery fire in the east of Harib Al-Qaramish district as well as clashing in contested areas in Sirwah, including Al-Rab'iah valley and around the Kawfal camp.
- There were also reports that a member of the local GPC committee, Naji bin Saleh Zaba, was shot dead in Marib city on 7 February, and that an explosion inside the security headquarters in the city on 9 February killed three people and injured six others.
- In **Sana'a** governorate, hostilities continued in Nihm district throughout the week. Anti-Houthi groups, supported by coalition aircraft, attacked the positions of Houthi-affiliated forces in the Hareeb Nihm and Milh areas, but were rebuffed. In response, pro-Houthi fighters fired rockets and artillery shells at opposition sites. Despite the steady rate of clashes, neither side has made any significant progress in the district.
- There was a low level of bombing on other districts in the governorate, including the capital Sana'a. Airstrikes hit the Al-Sawad camp to the south of the capital in Sanhan, a regular target, as well as the Jaref public baths and resort in the Bab Al-Fawarah area of Bilad Al-Rus.

- The Al-Hafa camp and Al-Nahdain mountain in the south of Sana'a city were the targets in the capital. There were also reports that armed men on a motorcycle reportedly threw a hand grenade at a house belonging to a local journalist in Hayl street in Ma'ain district on 7 February.
- Airstrikes hit a farm in the Qa'a Al-Haql area of Dhawran Anes in northern **Dhamar** on 5 February and construction equipment being transported on the Dhamar-Al-Husayniyah road on 7 February, killing one person and wounding another.
- Strikes also hit the Al-Hanakah bridge in north-western **Al-Mahweet** on 6 February. The bridge is on the Sana'a-Al-Hudaydah road, though it was reportedly still passable.
- The blitz on **Al-Hudaydah** that followed the 30 January attack on a Saudi warship by Houthi fighters off the coast continued throughout the week. The strikes have mainly targeted military sites, but fishing boats on 3 and 5 February, killing at least eight people. As the bombing intensifies there is the risk that infrastructure will be targeted, including port areas in Al-Hudaydah and Saleef as well as roads leading to nearby governorates, restricting access for all supplies and the movements of the local population.
- Houthi-affiliated forces launched attacks on local groups in the south of **Al-Bayda**, assaulting positions in the Aqabah Thurrah area of Mukayras and Yufan village in Dhi Al-Na'im, as they attempted to exploit the instability in neighbouring Abyan. In the north of the governorate, AQAP and local groups claimed further attacks on pro-Houthi fighters. The warring sides also reportedly exchanged over 100 detainees on 6 February.
- AQAP also claimed attacks on pro-Houthi forces in **Ibb**, reportedly assassinating a pro-Houthi commander near Al-Makhadir in central Ibb and near the Al-Dhale border on 5 February.
- Heavy confrontations continued in the port town of Al-Mokha in western **Taiz** as coalition-backed forces managed to gradually push pro-Houthi fighters to the northern edges of the town. The coalition-backed forces' assaults on the town centre and the sea port area saw them make steady progress, reportedly entering the port facility on 9 February. In support of the ground fighting coalition jets pounded the area as they try to dislodge Houthi-affiliated fighters as well as cut-off routes to the north and east.
- Coalition airstrikes also continued to target routes leading to the frontlines in Al-Mokha, hitting sites along the main roads to the north, east and south of the town. The Al-Mokha junction-Khalid bin Al-Walid military camp area to the east has seen particularly heavy bombing, while ground fighting is also ongoing in neighbouring Maqbanah and Mawza as the warring parties compete for control of the main roads.
- Although the coalition-backed military operation in western Taiz has reached Al-Mokha, their lines continue to be harassed by Houthi-affiliated forces along the coast from Bab Al-Mandab to northern Dhubab. Fighting is still breaking out along the main coastal road, especially the mountainous Al-Omary area, which remains under the control of pro-Houthi fighters.

- In the southern districts, armed clashes are ongoing in Al-Silw, Hayfan and Al-Wazi'iyah. Houthi-affiliated forces made slight gains on these fronts in recent weeks, but the fighting continues to go back-and-forth between the sides.
- Meanwhile, hostilities have slowed in Taiz city. Intermittent shelling, rocket fire and armed clashes are still reported, but at a lower level than last month as forces have been redeployed to the western coast
- Intermittent clashes were reported over the order in **Lahj**, especially around the Al-Mafalees area in Tur Al-Bahah. The director of the governorate education office also survived an assassination attempt when a UVIED was discovered on his car in Al-Hawta.
- The situation in **Aden** was unchanged. Daily protests continued over unpaid wages, with soldiers and public- and private-sector workers staging demonstrations and blocking roads in neighbourhoods across the city. The city also continued to be affected by the fuel shortage, which is entering its fourth week, leading to periodic electricity cuts. Aden also saw a steady rate of small-scale security incidents, but recent weeks have been quieter than the first month of the year.
- AQAP militants began re-deploying inside most districts in **Abyan** from 2 February, publicly establishing their presence through setting-up checkpoints and blowing up security buildings. The group exploited the vacuum left by the withdrawal of security belt forces, over the non-payment of salaries and the lack of support, in Ahwar, Al-Mudiyah, Al-Mahfad, Al-Wade'a, Lawdar and Khanfir. Following these developments, the local security chief, Abdullah Al-Fadhli resigned on 4 February, citing disagreements with coalition members over their lack of support.
- However, local groups began to push back. Militants were expelled from the towns of Shoqra and Lawdar after residents took up arms against them. Tribesmen also ambushed militants in Mudiydah and parts of Lawdar, reportedly killing several AQAP fighters. Militants also attacked the security forces in Zinjibar, from which the security belt forces have kept them out of the town.
- In **Shabwa**, repairs on the LNG pipeline leading from central Marib governorate to the terminal at Balhaf were completed on 3 February; the pipeline was sabotaged on 5 December. Balhaf remains closed, but there are efforts to restart operations. In the north of the governorate, the fighting slowed after weeks of intensive clashes in Bayhan and Usaylan districts, with reports that anti-Houthi forces are under siege in the Al-Saq area. Despite the concerted efforts of anti-Houthi military units supported by coalition aircraft, strategic areas in both districts are still controlled by pro-Houthi forces.
- **Hadramawt** was generally quiet in the week. Small-scale security incidents, though, continued to be reported in the central Wadi Hadramawt area. Armed men opened fire on a qat seller's vehicle in the Al-Batinah area of Al-Qatn district on 6 February, killing one person and injuring another.

Annex B. Latest flight information

	Sana'a	Aden	Sayoun
Al-Yemenia			
No. of flights per week according to Yemenia	0 flights per week	4 flights per week	1 flight per week
Number of flights reported in the last week	0	8	5
Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commercial flights are indefinitely suspended. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regular flights to Jeddah and Riyadh started in August, and more flights may be added as the Hadi government returns to the city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The number of flights can vary, dependent on the airline receiving permission from the Saudis
Current status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All flights were suspended on 9 August by the Saudi-led coalition. There is no timetable on when they will resume 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly flights from Amman and Cairo. Occasional flights to Khartoum and Jeddah/Riyadh 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sayoun-Amman-Sayoun Sayoun-Cairo-Sayoun Occasional flights to Socotra
Stop station for search	Bisha, Saudi Arabia	None	None
Passenger restrictions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yemenis can fly without problem unless on Saudi wanted lists (or the Houthi equivalent in Sana'a) In addition to a visa foreigners need a pre-approval from the Saudis in order to be allowed to fly with Yemenia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yemenis can fly without problem unless on Saudi/Hadi wanted lists Foreigners – No clear information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yemenis can fly without problem unless on Saudi/Hadi wanted lists Foreigners – No clear information
UNHAS			
Current status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNHAS flights to Djibouti and Amman resumed on 16 August, but are dependent on permission from the coalition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suspended indefinitely due to the security situation Organisations have also been using boats to reach the port of Al-Mualla 	None

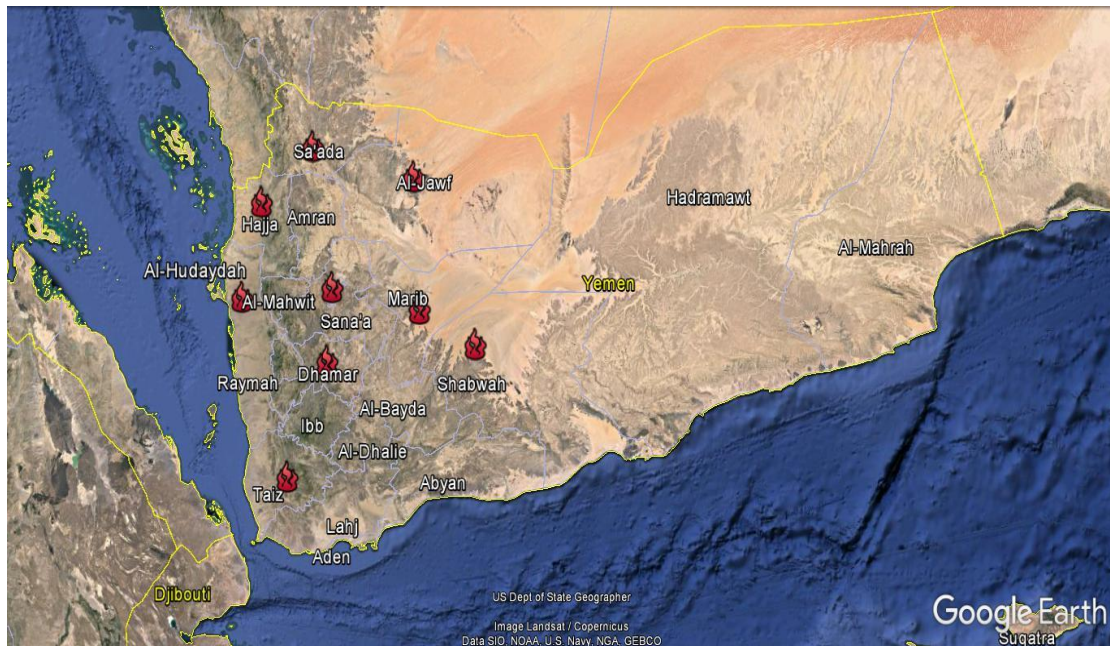
Annex C. Targets of coalition airstrikes

Governorate	Districts	Area	Targets
Sana'a - capital	Al-Sab'ain		Al-Hafa military camp, Al-Nahdain military camp
	Sanhan	Al-Sawad	Al-Sawad military camp
Sana'a	Bilad Al-Rus		
	Nihm		
Dhamar	Dhawran Ans	Qa'a Al-Haql	Farms
	Wisab Al-Safil	Al-Husayniyah road, Al-Mishrafah	Construction equipment
Hajja	Midi		Pro-Houthi forces
	Harad		Pro-Houthi forces
Al-Hudaydah	Al-Torfah Island		Fishing boats
	Al-Tuhayat		Farm
	Bait Al-Faqih	Nafhan	Chicken farm
	Al-Mina	Coastal line	Al-Hudaydah port
	Al-Salif	Al-Jabbanah	Coastal Defence Military Camp
	Bajil	Al-Shareef mountain, Al-Jarash	Old radar, Checkpoint
	Kamaran	Kamaran island	
	Zabid		
	Al-Sukhnah		
	Luhayah		
Al-Jawf	Al-Maslub	Al-Nomaniyah	
	Al-Maton		
Marib	Barat Al-Marashi		Education office
	Sirwah	Al-Mahjazah, Al-Mukhaddarah, Habab valley	Residential areas, Pro-Houthi forces
Sa'ada	Monabbih	Al-Midhah junction	
	Baqim		

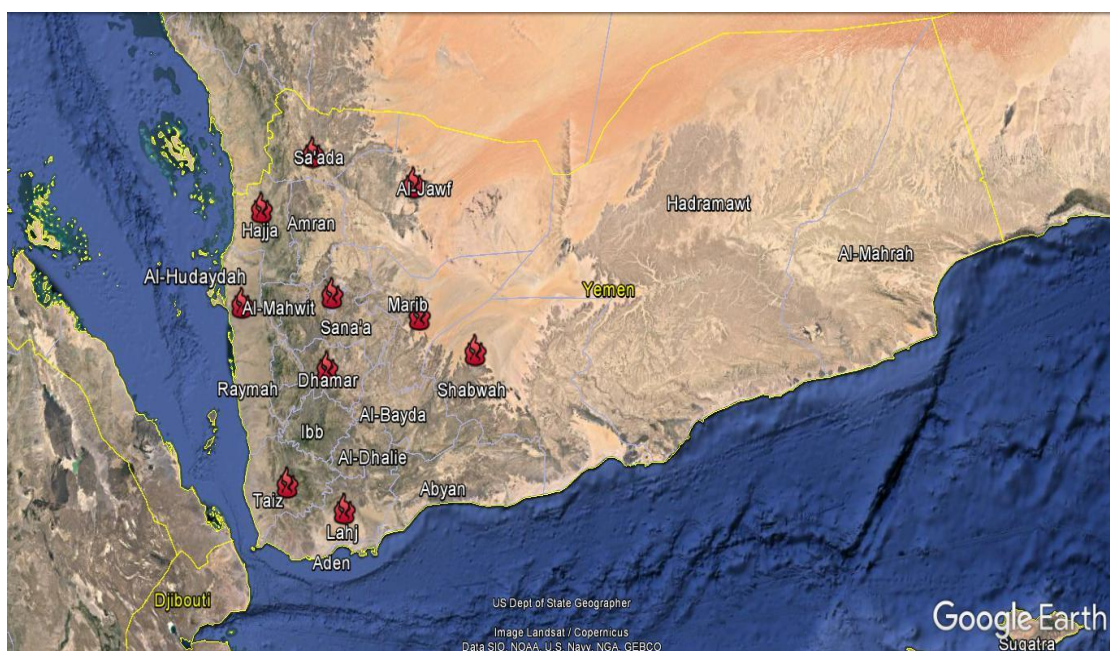
Shabwa	Kitaf	Al-Aqeeq, Jaifan, Rashahah, Al-Aishah	
	Al-Dhahir		Walibah school
	Razih		Abdullah Bin Masoud School, House
	Majz	Al-Maqsal	Gas truck
	Usaylan	Al-Hina junction	
Taiz	Al-Mokha	Yakhtol, Al-Mokha junction, Al-Nar mountain	Pro-Houthi forces, Telecommunications network, Al-Mokha market
	Mawza	Al-Shabakah mountain	
	Al-Ma'afir	Al-Rawy mountain	
	Maqbanah		

Annex D. Maps of airstrike locations in Yemen

Map of airstrikes countrywide (3-9 February)



Map of airstrikes countrywide during February



Map of airstrikes in Sana'a (3-9 February)

