

Security Advisory: Yemen & Bab el-Mandeb Strait (15 April 2015)

Yemen Security Brief

The humanitarian crisis continues to deepen in Yemen. UNICEF has reported that 18 out of 22 governorates are now affected by the ongoing conflict.

Schools, health facilities, communication towers and electricity stations have been severely damaged. Telephone land lines and mobile phone networks in parts of Aden and Abyan are no longer operational. Local media has reported that the Yemeni Electricity Corporation is running short on fuel, and the national electricity supply might be discontinued in the coming days. The food and fuel situation is rapidly deteriorating as supply ships carrying wheat and fuel have been refused entry at Hodeidah port. UNICEF is working to provide essential services including water distribution and the repair of water systems in the south. A second aircraft carrying 76 metric tonnes of medical supplies and other aid arrived in Sana'a on Tuesday.

Coalition airstrikes are focusing on targets which will prevent Houthi militias from regrouping or taking advantage of capabilities at Houthi controlled military camps. On Tuesday, UAE jet-fighters attacked weapons and radar depots, including a Katyusha rockets depots in Aden. The airstrikes also targeted mountain tunnels believed to be weapons depots for arms and ammunitions. Coalition forces also struck camps in Al-Majd, Maareb, Al-Baidha and Sanaa, where it is believed that Houthis militias are trying to regroup.

In Aden, the situation remains unchanged. Houthi militias are targeting the neighbourhoods of Kaiter, Mualla and the coastal road. These operations are expected to decline as Houthi logistical supply lines are severed. There has been slow movement between cities, indicating that the Houthis may be taking defensive positions. Land operations are intense in Saada and on the northern Yemeni border. Saudi surveillance has reportedly spotted movements indicating Houthi militias may be attempting to reorganise near the border.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia yesterday discussed holding a "major military manoeuvre" in Saudi Arabia with other Gulf States. The statement may be a signal that coalition members could eventually follow their air campaign with a ground intervention.

On Tuesday, the United Nations Security Council Resolution on Yemen was passed — 14 to 0, with Russia abstaining. The resolution demands:

1. That all parties end the violence that could undermine the political transition in Yemen;
2. That the Houthis immediately withdraw from areas they have captured; relinquish arms seized from military and security institutions; cease actions that are within the authority of Yemeni Government; and refrain from any threats to neighbouring States;

3. The safe release of Yemeni Defence Minister, Major-General Mahmoud al-Subaihi, all political prisoners, and any individuals under house arrest or arbitrarily detained;
4. That the Houthis end the recruitment of children and release all children from their ranks.

The resolution further prohibits the sale of weapons to three Houthi leaders, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, his son Ahmed Ali Saleh, and "those acting on their behalf or at their direction in Yemen." Following the UN resolution, the US Treasury Department stated that the US has placed further sanctions on Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi, and leading backer Ahmed Ali Saleh, son of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. Houthi rebels have condemned the resolution arms embargo and called on "the masses of the Yemeni people to rally and protest on Thursday to condemn the Security Council resolution in support of the aggression".

Meanwhile, Iran has proposed a peaceful solution to the crisis in Yemen. The plan is expected to be submitted to the UN today. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, said that the plan involves a ceasefire, humanitarian aid, dialogue between opposing factions and "a broad-based government, friendly to all its neighbours." Zarif added, "This issue should be resolved by the Yemenis. Iran and Saudi Arabia need to talk but we cannot talk to determine the future of Yemen."

The Algerian foreign ministry has also been developing a peace initiative which will be presented to Yemen's rival factions. Algeria is stressing direct dialogue between the opposing factions, and has offered to host the peace talks.

Meanwhile, in a statement on Tuesday, Yemen's al Qaeda branch says its top cleric, Ibrahim al-Rubaish, was killed in a drone attack two days earlier. The group did not specify where the purported strike took place. Rubaish was a Saudi national; the US had offered a \$5 million bounty for his death or capture. Yemeni and US officials had no immediate comment on the claim.

Gulf of Aden Security Brief

As of 13 April, Yemen has banned entry into its territorial waters. Commercial and military vessels cannot enter the designated zones without authorization from the Yemeni government. The Saudi-led coalition has tightened the blockade on Yemen's ports.

There is a blockade of vessel traffic from Bab Al Mandab to Yemeni territorial water, with particular focus on vessels that may have recently called at Iranian or Iraqi ports. The blockade has begun to affect shipping activity, including the delivery and loading of oil and gas shipments.

The research director at shipbroking firm Banchero Costa said, "Of course, the big concern for everyone is the risk that the Yemeni conflict will get out of hand and rebels would try to sabotage Saudi oil trade by, say, targeting with rockets ships traversing the Bab Al-Mandeb strait." Shipping association BIMCO has advised all vessels to transit the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea at least 12 nautical miles outside Yemeni territorial waters when possible.

The escalating tension has increased the likelihood of an incident at sea between Iran and the coalition or international forces. MS Risk advises merchant vessels to be aware and vigilant to this threat – these tensions have led to increased naval boardings and inspections with little or no notice. MS Risk continues to advise vessels to avoid all Yemen ports until further notice. We continue to advise vessel operators to notify their insurers prior to sailing through the Bab el-Mandeb. Any vessels currently in the Gulf of Aden are advised to remain vigilant at all times. Pirate Action Groups (PAG's) are likely to continue to operate in this region and may easily be mistaken for refugees fleeing the chaos in Yemen.

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