

Armed Conflict



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Yemen SITUATION UPDATE: Saudi-backed forces reportedly take strategic areas in Wadi Hadhramaut during night hours of January 2; take precautions, expect Saudi-backed forces to try breaking southwards toward Mukalla

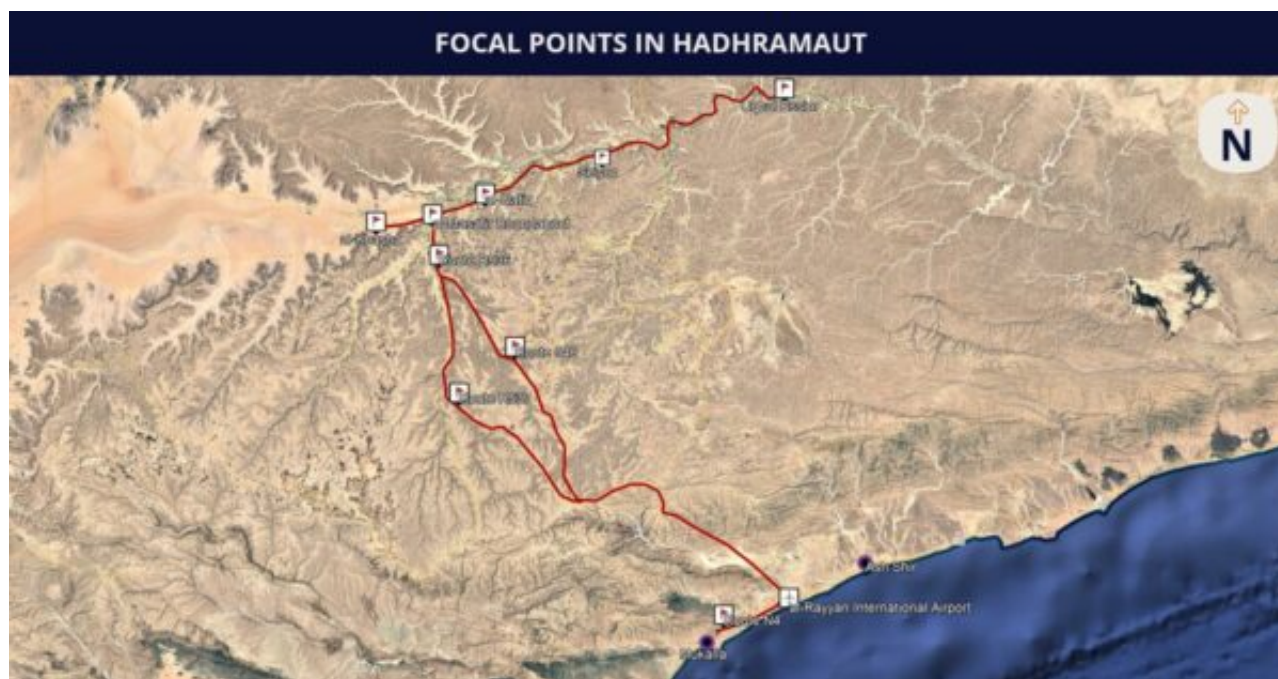
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Current Situation:

- According to Saudi media, the Saudi-backed Presidential Command Council (PCC)-affiliated Governor of Hadhramaut, Salem al-Khanbashi, stated that the Hadhramaut Tribal Alliance (HTA) took control of Hadhramaut's Thamud District and the Uqbat Essim area.
- The Governor also requested Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces to evacuate the al-Rayyan (Mukalla) International Airport, indicating that he might ask the Saudi-led Coalition to target it. Unconfirmed reports suggest that STC forces heeded the call and have begun evacuating the site.
- During the night hours of January 2, the UAE's Ministry of Defence (MoD) stated that the Emirati counter-terrorism teams, whom Abu Dhabi decided to redeploy from Yemen, have completed their withdrawal from the country.
- Emerging Saudi reports also indicated that PCC-aligned forces took almost complete control of the

city of Seiyun, barring several pockets of STC control.

- Governor al-Khanbashi indicated that the Saudi-led Arab coalition will be requested to target and destroy any STC reinforcements coming from the governorates of Shabwa, Abyan, and al-Bayda, as well as along roads leading from other neighboring governorates.
- These developments follow STC President, Aidarous al-Zubaidi's [earlier announcement](#) of a transitional roadmap toward southern independence.



Assessments & Forecast:

1. Al-Zubaidi's declaration constitutes a highly notable and politically loaded development that effectively initiates a formal secession process for South Yemen. According to the STC, it would entail the same borders of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) that existed until unification in 1990. This, in turn, highlights the STC's decision to embrace a policy of defiance vis-a-vis the PCC and Saudi Arabia, capitalizing on its territorial gains over the recent months and demonstrating a degree of confidence in its ability to move forward with the scheme.
2. The PCC's response highlights an effort to double down on a countermeasure to derail the STC's announcement and regain control of strategic military bases and territories it has lost to the STC over the past weeks. While most accounts reporting on the situation on the ground emanate from Saudi Arabia and are thus biased, PCC-aligned forces do appear to continue to make significant gains in their ongoing military campaign beyond their [earlier advance into al-Khasha](#). This includes advancing from al-Khasha eastwards along National Highway N5 and taking over strategic sites in Wadi Hadhramaut, which, at least according to Saudi reports, include Seiyun and al-Qatn.
3. Two primary factors likely facilitated this relatively swift anti-STC advance. Firstly, the resilience of the bond and the support the PCC continues to receive from the HTA. Secondly, the Royal Saudi Air Force appears to be actively pursuing and targeting STC forces, providing essential support to PCC-aligned ground forces and potentially changing the balance of power on the ground in favor of the latter.
4. It also highlights Riyadh's resolve to actively support its backed factions. It underscores its previous formal statements that it considers the developments in Hadhramaut to be directly linked to its national security and core interests. This is especially so given that Hadhramaut is Yemen's largest governorate and accounts for a significant share of the country's oil and gas assets. As such, it is a strategic asset crucial to the internationally recognized government's ability to survive and function. It also shares an extensive border area with Saudi Arabia.

- 5. FORECAST:** At the same time, despite its extensive support to STC forces as part of its proxy-oriented approach, Abu Dhabi will likely be less inclined to involve fighter aircraft to support STC ground forces. This is because it likely retains a lower appetite for direct battlefield engagement and likely still wishes to contain direct tensions vis-a-vis Saudi Arabia. This may give PCC forces an advantage over the coming days and weeks.
- 6. FORECAST:** As an immediate-term outlook, PCC-aligned forces will likely capitalize on their gains along Highway N5 and concentrate resources to try to push southwards, mainly along Highway R536 and 540, toward Hadhramaut's capital, Mukalla. This is because gaining control of the city and the adjacent al-Rayyan Airport would significantly undermine the STC's hold over the governorate. While it is still unclear whether PCC forces have the capacity and resources to achieve such military objectives, the PCC will seek to increase its leverage and pressure the STC to make concessions, potentially through renewed dialogue under Riyadh's auspices.
- 7. FORECAST:** Saudi airstrikes against strategic military and civilian facilities, especially the Mukalla Port and al-Rayyan Airport, cannot be ruled out over the coming hours and days, amid possible Saudi suspicions that the UAE is delivering arms through these facilities. Overall, the main highways connecting the cities in the governorate will be exposed to heightened risks of armed conflict.

Recommendations:

- 1. Avoid all travel to Yemen at this juncture due to the ongoing military escalation. Consult with us at intel@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434 for custom risk assessments and contingency plans.**
2. Those operating or residing in Yemen are advised to avoid all travel to Hadhramaut, especially to areas along Highway N5 and the roads leading from it southwards toward Mukalla. In Hadhramaut, shelter in place in areas affected by armed conflict and implement contingency plans to ensure safety and business continuity.
3. Monitor travel-related disturbances due to the current hostilities and reconfirm all travel itineraries.
4. Remain cognizant of the potential for strikes to impact strategic airports and ports, particularly Mukalla's Port and al-Rayyan International Airport. Remain cognizant of the shutdown of the Aden International Airport amid the tensions.