

Saudi-led air war in Yemen enters second week

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As Saudi-led air strikes continued throughout Yemen on Thursday military forces loyal to former dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh, who are backing the Iranian supported Shiite Houthi militia, seized control of the presidential palace in the southern port city of Aden.

President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who escaped house arrest in Sanaa in February, sought to establish the palace as a rallying point for loyalist forces against the Houthi militia that have taken control over most of the western provinces. Hadi fled Yemen for Saudi Arabia last week as the Houthi militia advanced on Aden and fighter jets strafed his compound.

The Houthi rebels further consolidated their control elsewhere in Aden, deploying tanks and establishing foot patrols in the city's central Crater district. The continued advance of the Houthis in the face of an expanding air war heightened the possibility of a ground invasion spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

"Saleh and the Houthis are keeping the pressure on Aden, which is the weak point in Saudi strategy," an unidentified diplomat in Saudi Arabia told Reuters. "I think the Saudis would put ground forces into Aden to recapture it if it falls. It is a red line for them."

Egypt's *Al Ahram* reported that several dozen "Arab coalition" soldiers arrived in a single boat a few hours after the Houthis advance as part of a last ditch effort to shore up Hadi loyalists in Aden. Saudi officials denied that the deployment of coalition soldiers had begun.

Coalition spokesman Saudi Brigadier General Ahmed Asseri flatly denied that Saudi troops were in Aden. "We didn't have any operations in the port. This was not us," he told reporters.

Speaking at an event sponsored by the House of Representatives in Washington, DC on Thursday, Saudi Ambassador Adel Al Jubeir stated that his country did not yet have any "formal" troops on the ground in Aden. He said that an official invasion aimed at pushing back the

Houthi remained a possibility. "The issue of using ground troops is always something that is on the table," Jubeir stated.

Port officials in Aden stated that, rather than Saudi-led coalition forces, the soldiers were armed guards from a Chinese warship that had disembarked to determine the safety of the area as they evacuated people from the city. Xinhua reported that a Chinese warship had docked in Aden Thursday in order to evacuate 225 non-Chinese citizens to Djibouti.

Since Monday two Chinese warships, Linyi and Weifang, have been docking in Aden in order to evacuate several hundred Chinese citizens and employees of Chinese companies from Yemen. Significantly, the operation marks the first time that People's Liberation Navy warships have docked in a foreign harbor to extract citizens from a war zone.

The Indian government also dispatched a warship to Aden this week to begin evacuating approximately 4,000 of its citizens from Yemen to Djibouti. Evacuation by sea is the only feasible route for those wanting to flee since a no-fly zone set up by Saudi Arabia and air strikes on Yemen's international airports have made domestic flights into or out of the country nearly impossible.

Saudi Arabia and its allies began launching air strikes last week with the ostensible purpose of halting the rapid advance of the Houthis and propping up Hadi. Saudi officials have said that military operations will continue in Yemen until Hadi can return and assert control over the country.

Air strikes on Thursday hit a Houthi-controlled and pro-Saleh military base overlooking the strategic Bab Al Mandeb strait and Houthi-held positions in the southern coastal town of Shaqra. Saudi-led airstrikes have killed and wounded hundreds of civilians in addition to hitting military targets throughout the country.

In recent days, bombs have been dropped on a refugee

camp in northern Yemen, killing at least 40 people, as well as a dairy factory in the western port city of Hodeida, killing at least 37 workers. The Russian Consulate in Aden was severely damaged after airstrikes on Wednesday blew out nearly every window in the building.

The first coalition casualties of the war were reported on Thursday after a Saudi border guard was killed and ten others wounded after their observation post in the southern province of Asir came under fire from Houthi rebels inside Yemen. Saudi Arabia has mobilized approximately 150,000 soldiers and has positioned heavy artillery and other military equipment along its border with Yemen.

Amidst the fighting in the western provinces militants from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) raided the southern port city of Mukalla early Thursday morning. The militants seized control of a branch of the Yemeni central bank and released at least 270 inmates from a local prison. Among those freed was Khaled Batarfi, a leader of AQAP in Abyan province who had been arrested in 2011. Outside of Aden, Mukalla had been one of the few remaining major cities controlled by forces loyal to Hadi.

The United States has been waging a war against AQAP in Yemen since 2009 when US President Barack Obama signed a secret agreement with then-President Saleh authorizing drone strikes against the Islamic militants based in the country's southern and eastern provinces.

American and European Special Operations troops evacuated the Al Anad airbase last month after AQAP fighters overran the nearby city of Lahij. Al Anad had been used to coordinate and launch drone strikes against the group.

The massively unpopular drone war has so far killed more than 1,000 people and stoked sectarian tensions contributing significantly to destabilization of the Yemeni government.



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