

Thematic Report: A review of the civilian impact of recent hostilities in Ma'rib

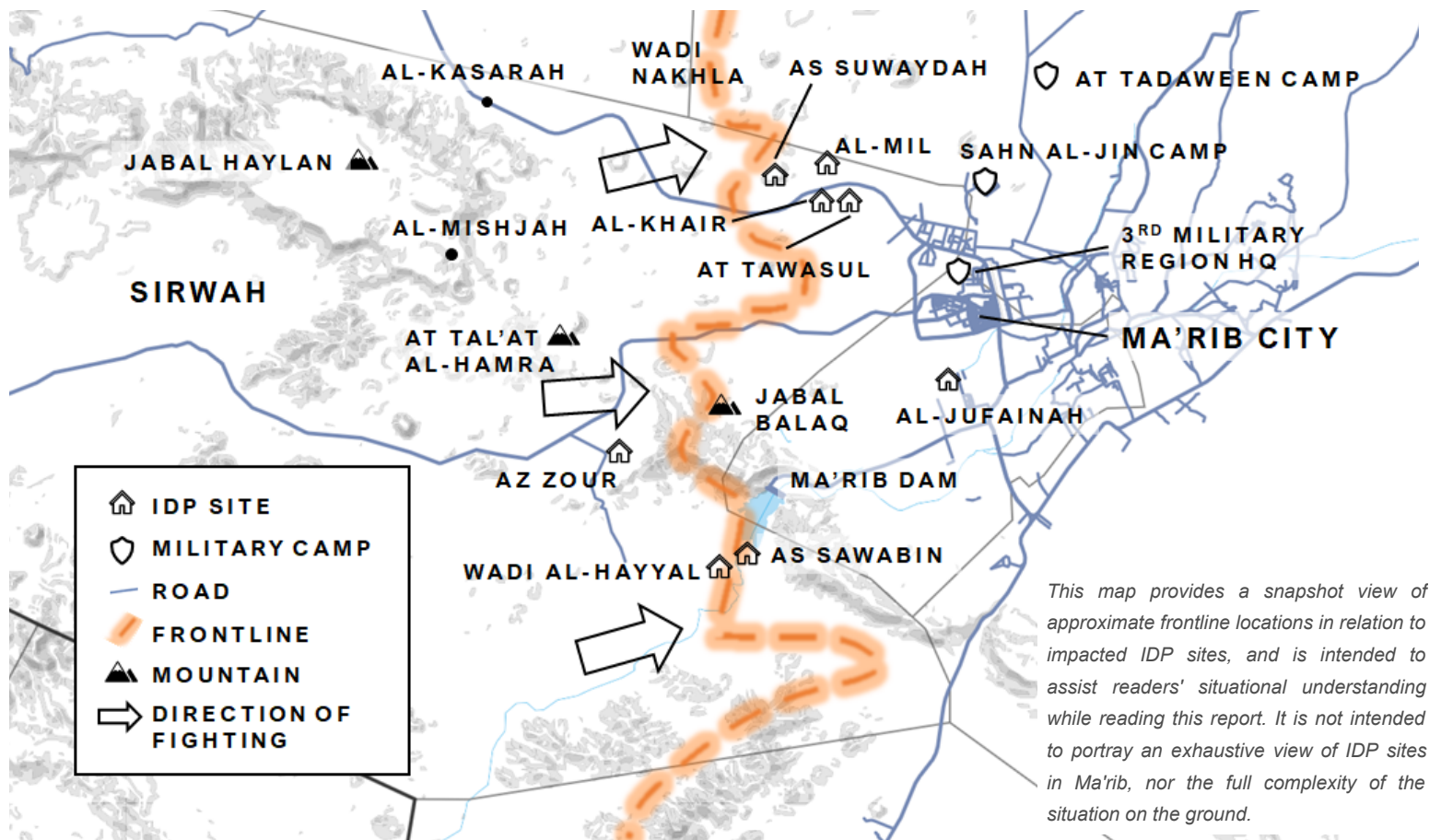
April 2021

In early February, having seen months of stalemated hostilities, the offensive in Ma'rib resumed, with frontlines shifting eastbound along the two main asphalted roads connecting Ma'rib city with Sana'a. The frontlines have progressed towards Ma'rib city, with an increasingly significant impact on the civilian population. Amid the intensive fighting, civilian casualties and displacements have been mounting, with several reports of artillery fire landing on and near IDP sites, while rockets and missiles continue to hit neighbourhoods in Ma'rib city and heavy airstrikes persist across the governorate. This report summarises recent Ma'rib conflict developments and uses CIMP data to examine the direct impact this renewed fighting has had on civilians in Ma'rib.

Since the start of 2021, CIMP has recorded 79 incidents of armed violence that have directly impacted civilians in Ma'rib governorate, resulting in 74 civilian casualties, including 18 fatalities. Of these casualties, 40 were reported in March; the highest civilian casualty count CIMP has recorded in one month in Ma'rib since the project commenced, at the start of 2018. Moreover, the first quarter of 2021 has seen over half the civilian casualty count recorded throughout 2020.

The analysis presented in this report is based on data analysed as at 12 April 2021, derived solely from open source reporting that is systematically cross-checked.

Ma'rib frontline map in relation to IDP sites



Summary of recent conflict developments

As the lines of control closed in around the Ma'rib dam reservoir, on the more southerly of the two roads connecting Ma'rib city with Sana'a, hostilities became concentrated around Al-Talat Al-Hamra and Jabal Balaq, to the north of the dam. Limited hostilities were also reported on the south western shores of the reservoir. On the more northerly route, leading from Jawf junction to Ma'rib city, hostilities have been focused around Al-Kasarah and Mashjah areas, and the overlooking high ground, particularly in the vicinity of Jabal Haylan, just south of the route. To the north of the route, fighting has also reportedly reached Wadi Nakhla and the surrounding heights. The frontlines continue to see daily hostilities, with intermittent advances and counterattacks, as key territory continues to switch between the two sides, accompanied by a heavy rate of airstrikes. Intermittent hostilities have also persisted in the south of the governorate, although at a lesser intensity than on the frontlines to the west of Ma'rib city. Nonetheless, the hostilities remain concentrated around the main supply route leading northbound to Ma'rib city, including around Al-Abdiyah and Rahabah districts, and on the borders of Jabal Murad district, likely resulting in ongoing implications for access along the route.

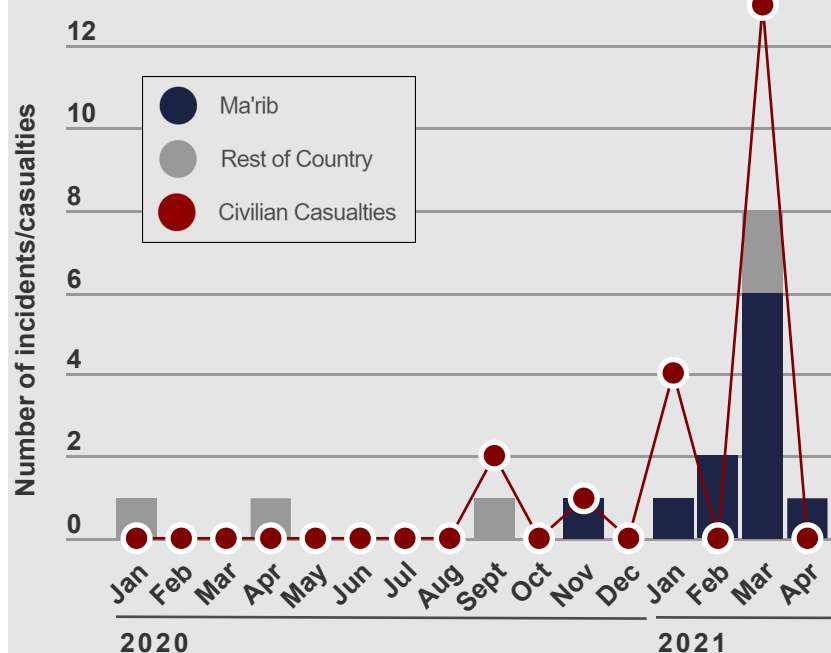
Impact on IDP Sites in Sirwah

Overview

Numerous IDP sites are situated around Ma'rib city, and the city itself has a high IDP presence. Reports have suggested that violence has spread into and around IDP sites, with the risk to IDPs compounded by unconfirmed reports of authorities restricting the movement of IDPs away from these areas, as well as reports of military forces establishing positions within IDP sites. CIMP has recorded nine incidents of IDP sites being directly impacted by armed violence in Ma'rib so far this year, affecting at least seven different sites, some more than once. All IDP sites impacted are in Sirwah, and all have been affected since 15 February, corresponding with the escalation of the fighting in the governorate. A map of the sites impacted is shown on Page 1. Six IDP sites have been impacted by shelling, and two by airstrikes, cumulatively displacing as many as 1,980 households. This is a significant increase from 2020, when one IDP site had been impacted by shellfire in the governorate, in As Safra area in Medghal, in November, injuring a child.

When IDP sites in Sirwah were first impacted by frontline hostilities in late February and early March, no civilian casualties were reported, but there were reports of livestock being killed in some incidents, likely disrupting a critical source of sustenance and livelihood for local families. It is highly likely that many of the families inhabiting the IDP sites had previously fled in the face of fast-approaching hostilities, which may explain the absence of civilian casualties. IDP sites in the Dhanah area (As Sawabin and Wadi Hayyal) were impacted several times by both shelling and airstrikes, and Al-Mil camp has also now been impacted at least twice, resulting in damage to tents, shelter materials and water tanks. Suwaydah camp has also been impacted by shellfire, on 3 April, although no casualties were reported. However, in March, civilian casualties on IDP sites increased: 13 civilian casualties have now been reported this year on account of shelling in Sirwah, 12 of whom were women, including one fatality, a pregnant woman. Women and children constitute a large proportion of the IDP population in Yemen (around 80 percent), and are particularly vulnerable when IDP camps are impacted, more-so because a large proportion of IDP households are headed by women and children.

Incidents impacting on IDP sites in Ma'rib and the rest of the country, and resulting civilian casualties



Incident details:

15 February: An IDP camp was impacted by missiles in Az Zur.

16 February: An IDP camp in Wadi Dhanah was impacted by artillery shells.

2 March: As Sawabin and Wadi Al-Hayyal IDP camps were impacted by airstrikes in Wadi Dhanah, resulting in the death of livestock.

9 March: As Sawabin IDP camp was impacted by artillery shells in Wadi Dhanah, killing livestock.

22 March: Five women were injured when three IDP sites, Al-Mil, Al-Khair and Tawasul, were impacted by artillery fire, reportedly also damaging 27 tents and 18 water tanks.

28 March: Six women and one man were injured when shelling impacted Al-Mil camp in Sirwah. One of the women, who was reportedly pregnant, later died of her injuries.

30 March: One woman was injured when missiles impacted As Suwaydah IDP camp.

3 April: As Sawabin IDP camp was impacted by artillery shells.

Forward Look

Due to the high IDP population and multitude of IDP camps around Ma'rib as hostilities continue, the risk to IDP sites is also likely to persist, particularly those situated along main roads in the vicinity of the city. Should fighting progress towards Ma'rib city, fears have been expressed about the increasing risk to civilians, as frontlines will move closer to more densely populated areas, especially those to the west and northwest of the city.

As a result, many IDPs have relocated to other sites within Sirwah, contributing to the severe overcrowding in those IDP sites. If these sites are forced to absorb more people, further pressure will be put on already scarce resources and facilities, increasing the likelihood of the population adopting negative coping mechanisms. Additional concerns include the risk of fires and the spread of communicable diseases, especially during the rainy season. Similarly, IDP influx into Ma'rib city is likely to put increasing strain on host communities with social and economic repercussions. Many IDPs in Yemen have already been displaced once if not on several occasions and remain particularly vulnerable, given they have limited resources and support mechanisms.

Shelling on Ma'rib city

Overview

Of the 74 civilian casualties reported in Ma'rib governorate so far this year, 43 have been reported in Ma'rib city, where the majority of incidents impacting civilians have been on account of shellfire, including missiles and rocketry. Shelling incidents impacting Ma'rib city this year have resulted in 39 civilian casualties. Moreover, as many as 32 houses in the city have been impacted, putting women and children at particular risk, while also threatening further displacement. Throughout 2020, 22 missile and rocketry incidents were reported to have impacted civilians in Ma'rib city, resulting in 40 civilian casualties. As of 14 April 2021, this number has almost been matched, at 39.

Incident details

7 February: Three civilians were killed and three others were injured when missiles impacted the city.

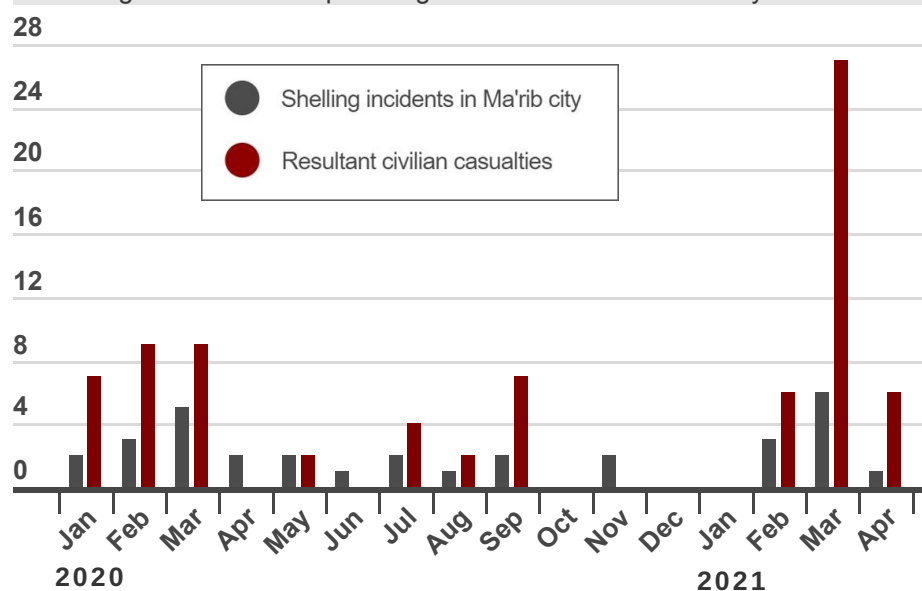
1 March: One civilian was killed and nine were injured when houses were impacted by shelling in Ar Rawdhah neighbourhood.

16 March: A market in the city was impacted by shellfire, killing three civilians injuring another eight.

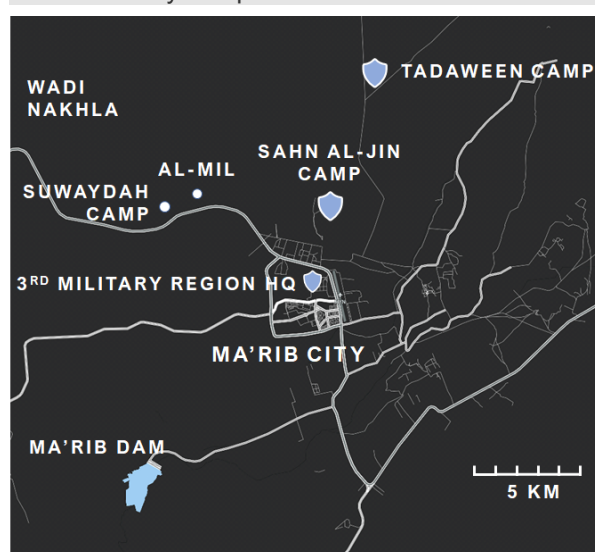
30 March: One civilian was killed and five others were injured, including a 13-year-old child, when missiles impacted the city.

3 April: One child was killed and another five children were injured when missiles impacted Ar Rawdhah neighbourhood.

Shelling incidents impacting civilians in Ma'rib city



Ma'rib city map



Forward look

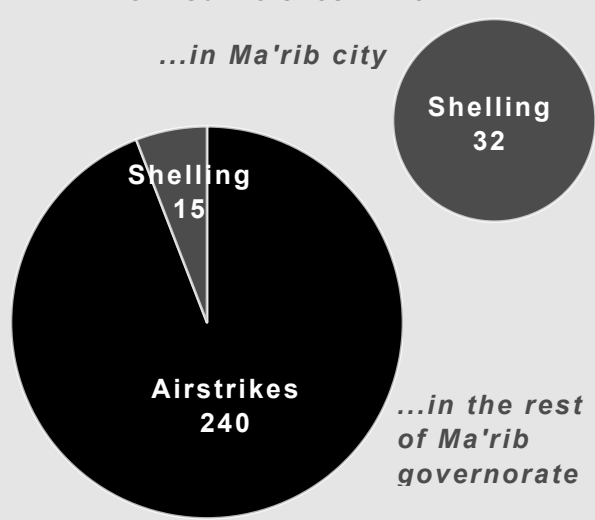
Missile and rocket attacks on Ma'rib city show no signs of abating, especially as frontlines reportedly remain within firing range of the city. Although attacks are reported to be targeting military and security sites across the city, many of these are in close proximity to residential areas, putting civilians, notably, children and women, and the urban IDP population at continued risk. If shellfire on the city persists, a range of civilian services and infrastructure may also be impacted, especially on the outskirts of the city, including health and education facilities, as well as critical water and electricity infrastructure, along with local businesses, threatening civilians' livelihoods and their access to essential services.

The impact of airstrikes on civilian houses

In frontline areas further from the city, the threat profile is different; in total, airstrikes in Ma'rib this year are assessed to have directly displaced as many as 240 households, while putting women and children at particular risk due to the loss of a safe, private dwelling space, exposing them to potentially unsafe and disrupted living conditions. Given its strategic importance in military terms, Sirwah district has seen the highest number of houses reported to have been impacted by airstrikes (105), followed by 80 in Medghal and 25 in Majzar.

Despite the high numbers of houses being impacted by airstrikes, only eight civilian casualties have so far been reported as a result, all in Rahabah; it is possible that civilians in the areas most heavily affected have already fled. Airstrikes have also reportedly impacted two IDP sites this year, affecting a particularly vulnerable sector of the Ma'rib population, although no casualties were reported, and a water project in Alfa, in Al-Jubah, which was reportedly destroyed, restricting critical access to water in a country already facing a severe water crisis.

Number of houses impacted by type of armed violence in 2021



IED incidents and remnant explosive ordnance

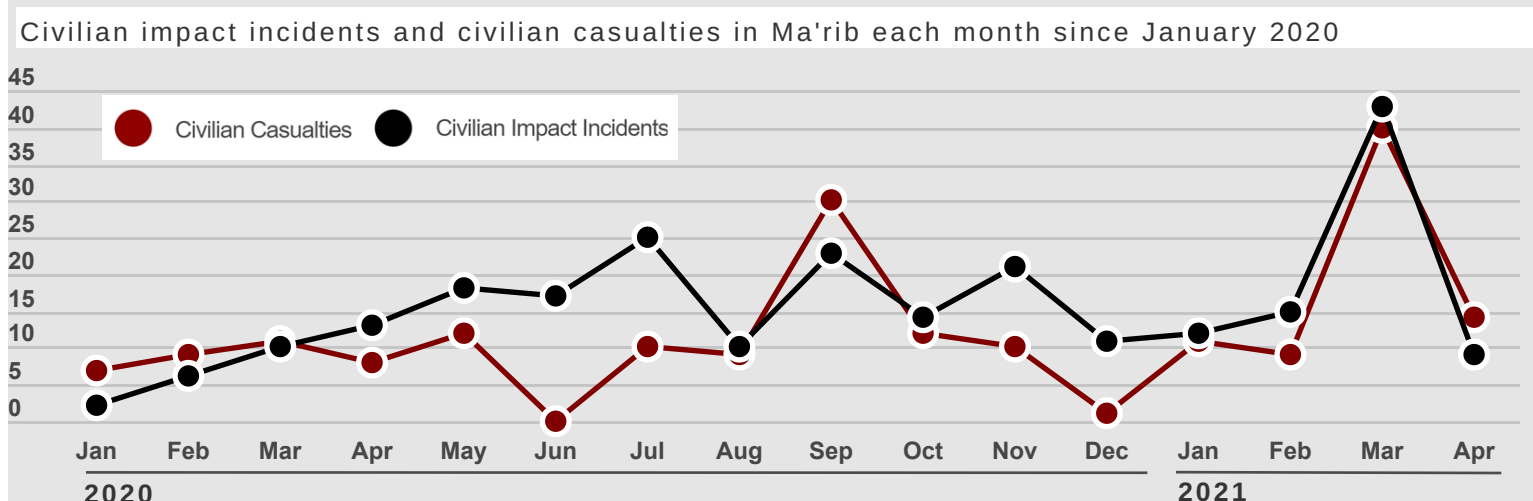
On 19 March, an IED incident was reported in southern Ma'rib, where the historic Al-Ghazaziyah fort was demolished in Rahabah district with improvised explosives. The incident was not reported to have resulted in any civilian casualties, but impacted a significant historical and cultural monument, said to date back five hundred years. It appears this may be the first cultural heritage site destroyed on account of armed violence in Ma'rib since CIMP initiated its monitoring at the start of 2018.

IED demolitions are often used as an intimidatory tactic by parties to the conflict, although houses are more commonly the target for such incidents, often in punitive cases. The destruction of cultural and historic heritage sites is likely to hold a complex psychological impact for civilians. In 2020, there were two instances of houses being detonated by IEDs, and a school in Majzar was also demolished in similar circumstances. There have yet to be any reports of houses being demolished with IEDs in Ma'rib this year, but the risk is believed to remain, particularly should grievances arise between forces and the local population.

An IED explosion was reported in Ma'rib city on 31 January, when a number of civilians were allegedly killed and injured when an explosive device detonated at the Bin Abbud qat market in the city. Although no further details around the incident were reported, it is reflective of the heightened levels of insecurity that have permeated civilian residential and commercial areas around Ma'rib city, posing an ever-present threat to the city's inhabitants.

Although a lesser threat when compared to shelling and airstrikes, landmines also remain a threat to civilians in Ma'rib; three landmine incidents have reportedly impacted civilians in the governorate since the start of the year, resulting in five civilian casualties. In January, one civilian was killed and another injured in Ma'rib district; the following month, a 50-year-old woman was killed in a landmine explosion in Majzar, and two children were injured when a landmine detonated in Rahabah.

Forward Look



The recent uptick in hostilities has resulted in increasing civilian casualties, and a rise in displacement as houses and IDP sites are repeatedly impacted, with a notable peak in March. Clashes on the ground and airstrikes are highly likely to continue, presenting a sustained threat to civilian settlements, including IDP sites. Should hostilities encroach upon Ma'rib city, the risk of impact to the civilian population will rise, including to critical civilian infrastructure and services.

Access around the governorate will also remain heavily dependent on conflict dynamics. Movement along the main supply routes to the west, south and northwest of the city is highly likely to remain restricted amid the ongoing hostilities, which are largely concentrated around these routes. These restrictions may impinge on civilians' ability to access essential goods and services, while possibly also hindering the safe passage of those attempting to flee from conflict areas. Conflict-related access restrictions may also impact the capacity of humanitarian partners to reach those in need. Access on the routes to the north of the city is also likely limited, although these are minor routes, passing predominantly through desert areas.

Access restrictions in the governorate are likely to be further compounded by the presence of landmines and other remnant explosive ordnance, in both active and dormant frontline areas. In what is reportedly a highly contaminated governorate, the rainy season brings the heightened possibility of landmine drift, and further hostilities risk displacing people into areas where the landmine threat is unknown, increasing the risk of injury from remnant explosive ordnance, to which IDPs are most vulnerable.

The Civilian Impact Monitoring Project is a service under the Protection Cluster for the collection, analysis and dissemination of open source data on the civilian impact from armed violence in Yemen, to inform and complement protection programming.



Protection Cluster Yemen

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