Witness and Impact

SAM Rights & Liberties

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# CIVILIAN AIRPORTS UNDER FIRE

## Houthi Attacks on Airports in Yemen and Saudi Arabia Amid Passenger Traffic and Aircraft Operations

### Taiz (September – October 2026)

### Human Rights Report | 2026




**SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties**

Holds consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Witness and Impact

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## About us

# SAM Organization for Rights and Liberties

SAM is an independent, non-profit Yemeni human rights organization that began its activities in January 2016 and obtained a license to operate in December 2017. The organization aims to document human rights violations in Yemen, work to stop violations through advocacy in partnership with local and international organizations, raise human rights awareness through societal rights development, and hold human rights violators accountable in Yemen in collaboration with international mechanisms and human rights organizations.

| Main Heading | Page (Est.) |
|---|---|
| Introduction | 4 |
| From the Mahan Air Flight to Attacks on Civilian Airports | 6 |
| When Danger Reaches the Runway | 7 |
| Investigation Methodology and Evidentiary Standards | 9 |
| Sources and Cross-Verification | 11 |
| Confirmed Attacks on Saudi Airports – October 2026 | 12 |
| Riyadh, 10 October: A Flight Landed 57 Minutes Before the Strike | 13 |
| 4. Riyadh, 8 October: Passengers and Families in the Departure Hall | 15 |
| 5. Dammam, 11 October: Passengers Aboard a Taxiing Aircraft as a Projectile Fell | 15 |
| 6. Abha, 6 October: Inbound Flights Diverted and Passengers Witnessed the Attack | 16 |
| 7. Dammam, 21 October: Actual Civilian Landing and Flight Diversions on the Night of the Attack | 16 |
| 8. Additional Incidents – Jazan, Najran, August and September | 17 |
| 9. Houthi Spokesperson's Announcements: Publication Timestamps and Claims of Airport Attacks | 18 |
| Attributing Attacks: From Military Announcements to Independent Evidence | 19 |
| 10. Aden International Airport: Attacks on Civil Aviation Through 28 October 2026 | 20 |
| Was There a Military Objective Inside Aden Airport? | 26 |
| Al Riyan International Airport: Claimed Military Objectives and the Limits on Using Civilian Facilities | 27 |
| Claimed Targets and Impact Sites: Assessing the Legality of the Attacks | 28 |
| Matrix for Assessing Claimed Military Objectives | 29 |
| Civilian Aircraft at Risk: The Significance of Attack Timing and Operational Phases | 30 |
| 11. Scale of the Disruption to Air Navigation | 31 |
| 12. Human and Humanitarian Harm: From Casualties to Lost Livelihoods and Interrupted Treatment | 33 |
| 13. Knowledge of Risk: A Disciplined Legal Assessment | 36 |
| 14. Earlier Pattern, 2017–2021: Knowledge of Civilian Risks | 38 |
| Civilian Objects and the Limits of Military Necessity: Legal Assessment and Responsibility | 39 |
| Conclusions | 40 |
| Recommendations | 42 |

## Introduction

SAM for Rights and Liberties' review of official statements, flight movement records, published testimonies and video recordings reveals repeated attacks carried out by the Houthi group against civilian airports in Yemen and Saudi Arabia during October 2026 while passengers and aircraft continued to use those facilities. The evidence establishes that civilians were exposed to danger inside airport terminals and aboard aircraft approaching landing, preparing for takeoff or taxiing. The attacks also caused deaths and injuries and disrupted civilian flights, demonstrating the dangers posed by missiles and drones to civil aviation facilities.

At Aden International Airport, an attack on 7 October forced flight IY603, arriving from Cairo, to divert to Jeddah after a missile landed near the runway. A further attack on 16 October prompted the evacuation of flight IY612 as it was preparing to depart, while flight QFF101 from Cairo was airborne. On 28 October, the airport was struck twice, at 13:00 and 15:00, according to Yemen's Ministry of Transport. The General Authority of Civil Aviation and Meteorology confirmed that airport facilities had been targeted, while Yemen Airways announced that inbound flights to Aden would be diverted to Djibouti. These events illustrate the immediate impact of the attacks on passenger movements and aviation safety.

In Saudi Arabia, flight records confirm that flight XY388 landed at Riyadh airport on 10 October about an hour before an attack, while surveillance footage reviewed by Reuters documented the presence of passengers inside the terminals during the explosions. Published eyewitness accounts also describe families, children and older people present during the 8 October attack, as well as passengers aboard a taxiing aircraft during the attack on King Fahd International Airport in Dammam on 11 October. Another attack on that airport on 21 October killed two people and injured eight. Al Riyan International Airport in Mukalla was also reportedly attacked by three drones, according to Yemen's Ministry of Transport. The wider escalation severely disrupted aviation: Cirium data analysed by Reuters showed the cancellation of approximately 86% of scheduled departures from Riyadh between 8 and 25 October, although these cancellations cannot all be attributed to any single attack.

SAM concludes that repeated Houthi attacks placed civilians, aircraft and airport facilities at risk despite the known civilian character of the airports and their continued use for passenger transport. Operational records, witness testimony, military claims and Houthi warnings are significant evidence of the foreseeability of civilian harm and awareness of the associated risks. SAM stresses that alleging the presence of military objectives within airports neither justifies attacks against protected civilian objects nor relieves the group of its obligations to distinguish between civilian and military targets, respect proportionality and take feasible precautions. The documented incidents provide substantial grounds for investigating violations, identifying those who ordered, planned and carried out the attacks, and holding those responsible to account.

# From the Mahan Air Flight to Attacks on Civilian Airports

Civilian airports in Yemen and Saudi Arabia have faced continued military escalation since July 2026, returning civil aviation facilities to the sphere of military operations after years of relative de-escalation. The confrontation began on 3 July, when the Iranian airline Mahan Air operated a flight to Sana'a to transport a Houthi delegation to Tehran without the approval of Yemen's internationally recognised government. On 13 July, airstrikes carried out by government forces with support from the Saudi-led coalition hit the runway at Sana'a International Airport to prevent an Iranian flight carrying the delegation back from landing, forcing it to divert to Hodeidah. Human Rights Watch confirmed damage to the airport's operational runway on the basis of satellite imagery analysis, raising serious concerns about the protection of civilian infrastructure during military operations.

After that strike, the Houthi group declared an end to the de-escalation phase and launched missile and drone attacks against Abha International Airport in Saudi Arabia, stating that they were in response to the strike on Sana'a airport. Military operations subsequently extended to civilian installations and facilities before intensifying sharply in October 2026, when the group increased its attacks on Saudi airports, including those in Riyadh, Abha, Dammam, Jazan and Najran, as well as Aden International Airport and Al Riyan Airport in Mukalla.

The October attacks showed that the risk had moved beyond physical damage to airport facilities to direct danger to passengers and civilian aircraft. Some attacks caused deaths and injuries; others forced flight diversions, aircraft evacuations and the suspension of air traffic. On 7 October, a projectile landed near the runway at Aden airport shortly before a passenger flight from Cairo was due to arrive, prompting the authorities to divert it to Jeddah. Subsequent attacks occurred while passenger services continued, exposing the increasingly grave danger to civil aviation facilities and those using them.

This sequence places the Houthi attacks on airports within an escalating pattern of military operations affecting vital facilities serving civilian purposes. Different motivations or stated justifications for the operations do not change the legal obligation to protect civilians and civilian objects. This background frames the examination of documented October attacks, their circumstances, the attacking party's knowledge of foreseeable civilian risks, and compliance with international humanitarian law.

# When Danger Reaches the Runway

Yemen Airways flight IY603, travelling from Cairo to Aden, was approaching its scheduled landing in the early hours of 7 October 2026 when Aden International Airport came under an attack that Yemen's Ministry of Transport said involved two ballistic missiles and drones. According to the ministry, one missile fell near the runway minutes before the aircraft's arrival, forcing the flight to divert to Jeddah to protect its passengers and crew.

The incident was more than damage to a service facility or a disrupted flight. It took place during a sensitive stage of operations when passenger safety depends on reliable air traffic communications, an operational runway and crews' ability to land safely or divert. The diversion demonstrates that the threat was not hypothetical: urgent operational action was needed to protect a passenger aircraft already bound for the airport.

Nine days later, the airport came under another attack. On 16 October, Yemeni authorities reported that two missiles had landed inside the airport perimeter or near its facilities while a Yemen Airways aircraft was preparing to depart for Cairo and a Fly Aden aircraft was inbound from Cairo. The Ministry of Transport said the aircraft on the ground was evacuated. Official information also indicated that one projectile fell approximately 500 metres from the Yemen Airways aircraft and about 100 metres from the runway centreline.

These two incidents raise questions beyond precisely where a missile landed: were the targets, weapons and timing selected with due regard for the airport's civilian functions and the passenger aircraft operating within the danger zone? What information did the attacking party have about use of the runway and surrounding facilities?

The attacks also extended to Saudi airports. Riyadh, Abha, Dammam, Jazan and Najran experienced strikes, some of which caused casualties. Flight records and passenger testimonies indicate that attacks occurred while air operations were ongoing or civilians were present inside the affected facilities.

On 21 October, local reports said that Al Riyan International Airport in Mukalla was attacked by drones. On the same day, an attack on King Fahd International Airport in Dammam killed two people and injured eight, according to an updated official Saudi statement.

These events expose a fundamental legal and humanitarian issue: when civilian facilities used to transport people are attacked, harm cannot be measured only by the impact point or the extent of damage to a runway. The assessment must also account for people endangered, aircraft forced to divert, services interrupted, and whether the attacker complied with the obligation to verify targets and prevent civilian harm.

This investigation examines the incidents documented in October and evaluates evidence concerning impact locations, civilian presence, aircraft movements, claims of responsibility and alleged military objectives. It also draws on United Nations findings regarding airport attacks between 2017 and 2021 and the December 2020 attack on Aden airport.

## Investigation Methodology and Evidentiary Standards

SAM for Rights and Liberties conducted this investigation using open-source research and verification methods (OSINT). It gathered and analysed official records, historical aircraft movement data, published testimonies and video recordings, Houthi military announcements, human rights reporting, and findings of national and international investigative mechanisms. The investigation sought to reconstruct the chronology of attacks on civilian airports in Yemen and Saudi Arabia during October 2026, establish their circumstances and the presence of civilians, and assess the resulting human, material and operational harm.

The review covered statements by civil aviation authorities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, Reuters reports and records from FlightStats, Cirium, Flightradar24 and FlightAware. SAM cross-checked independent sources to establish the dates and locations of attacks and aircraft movements, distinguishing scheduled times from actual movements, runway touchdown from arrival at a gate, and local time from Coordinated Universal Time (UTC). It also separated attack times from the publication times of official statements and Houthi announcements, and did not treat scheduled flight listings alone as proof that an aircraft was present when an attack occurred.

SAM applied a “reasonable grounds to believe” standard, requiring sufficiently reliable and consistent information to support an objective conclusion that an incident occurred as described. Evidence was assessed according to source authenticity and verifiability, the genuine independence and diversity of sources, consistency of time and location, agreement between accounts and operational or visual records, and the ability to exclude unsupported alternative explanations. Repetition of a report across multiple media outlets was not treated as independent corroboration when all relied on a single original source.

The investigation distinguished four levels of proof: that an attack took place, including its time and location; that civilians and aircraft were within the area of danger; attribution to a responsible party; and assessment of legality under international humanitarian law. Each was evaluated separately, without assuming that establishing one necessarily established the others. SAM also distinguished incidents corroborated by independent sources, information based on a single source, published testimony from persons the organisation had not interviewed directly, and unverified allegations. Where accounts conflicted, their origins and differences were examined without unsupported preference.

The investigation was confined to analysis of open sources and did not include site visits or direct witness interviews. Its findings therefore reflect the limitations and evidentiary weight of the available material. Meeting the “reasonable grounds to believe” standard does not establish every element of a crime or individual criminal responsibility. The findings were used to identify demonstrable incidents, assess the Houthi group's compliance with distinction, proportionality and feasible precautions, draw legal conclusions about documented violations, and identify questions requiring further investigation.

## Sources and Cross-Verification

SAM documented attacks on civilian airports using official statements issued by civil aviation authorities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, aircraft movement records, published passenger testimonies and video footage. Information from the Saudi General Authority of Civil Aviation, published through the Saudi Press Agency, and from Yemen's Ministry of Transport was used to verify attack dates, reported casualties and damage. FlightStats, Cirium, Flightradar24 and FlightAware records were used to establish flight movements, departure, landing and gate arrival times, and diversions or cancellations.

Temporal cross-checking distinguished scheduled times from actual aircraft movements, runway landings from gate arrivals, and local time from UTC. The time of an attack was distinguished from the publication time of official statements or Houthi military announcements; an announcement's timestamp was never assumed to be the time of the strike. Scheduled flight listings were not treated as independent proof that an aircraft was present during an attack. Where actual movement records were available, they were compared with witness accounts and video evidence to assess civilian presence and exposure to danger.

The investigation recognised the differing evidentiary value of its sources: official statements establish what the competent authorities reported, flight records document recorded operations, and testimonies and video footage provide evidence of passengers and aircraft within the area of an attack. Claims of responsibility were not treated as independent proof of every operational detail or resulting harm. Cross-verification aimed to reconstruct attack chronology and establish the overlap with civilian aviation activity, providing a documented basis for assessing risks to passengers and aircraft without exceeding what the evidence supports.

| Airport | Flight board examined | Role in the investigation |
|---|---|---|
| Riyadh (RUH) | Official arrivals and departures | Shows the nature of the operational schedule but the available search interface does not provide complete archives for 8–11 October. |
| Abha (AHB) | Skyscanner – Arrivals and departures | A live tracking board, not an independent historical record of the 6 October attack. |
| Dammam (DMM) | King Fahd Airport official flight listings | Shows flight and gate status; dated FlightStats records are used for independent comparison. |

The option to “show previous flights” does not necessarily provide a complete archive for a specified date several weeks earlier. No October flight data were attributed to these live boards solely because flights appeared when they were consulted.

# Confirmed Attacks on Saudi Airports – October 2026

Official statements by Saudi Arabia's General Authority of Civil Aviation and supporting news reports show that several Saudi airports were subjected to attacks during October 2026. These incidents killed and injured people, damaged civil aviation facilities and disrupted operations. The following table documents eight incidents involving airports in Riyadh, Abha, Dammam, Jazan and Najran, including their dates, publicly reported times, casualties, damage and original sources. Their recurrence within a short period is significant for assessing the direct risks to civilian aviation users and facilities, identifying the intended targets and weapons used, and evaluating compliance with the international humanitarian law rules protecting civilians and civilian objects.

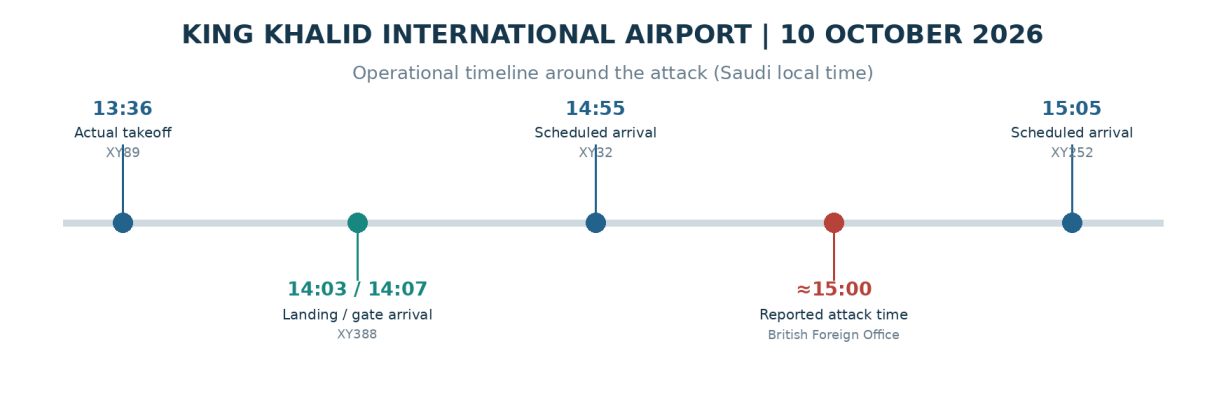
The investigation distinguished the times of attacks from the times when official statements were published. A statement's publication time was not used as evidence of when an attack occurred unless independently specified in the available sources.

| Date and airport | Reported attack time | Documented outcome | Original statement |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5 October – Jazan and Najran | Monday evening | 3 minor injuries and damage to both airports | SPA – official statement |
| 6 October – Abha | No precise time published | 2 deaths and 28 injuries | SPA – Abha and Riyadh |
| 7 October – Riyadh | No precise time published | 1 death and 8 injuries | SPA – Abha and Riyadh |
| 8 October – Riyadh | No precise time published | Attacks on facilities and a Saudia aircraft; 3 deaths | SPA – two attacks |
| 10 October – Riyadh | Approximately 15:00, according to the British Foreign Office | 13 deaths in the later toll, more than 300 injuries; operations suspended | SPA – initial statement; British Foreign Office [2] |
| 11 October – Riyadh | Sunday afternoon | 1 Pakistani resident killed and 11 injured, according to the supplementary statement | SPA – further attack |
| 11 October – Dammam | Around 20:30, according to a Reuters witness | Airport apron struck near parked aircraft | SPA – attack confirmation; Reuters – aircraft witness [2] |
| 21 October – Dammam | Wednesday evening | 2 deaths and 8 injuries, as updated on 22 October | SPA – supplementary statement |

The timestamp on a Saudi Press Agency statement is not the time of an attack. No publication timestamp was converted into a strike time in this investigation.

## Riyadh, 10 October: A Flight Landed 57 Minutes Before the Strike

The British Foreign Office places the attack at approximately 15:00, while the detailed record for flight XY388 shows that an Airbus A320neo, registration HZ-NS86, touched down at 14:03 and reached gate 108 in Terminal 1 at 14:07. The comparison establishes an actual civilian landing around 57 minutes before the attack, alongside diversions of other flights scheduled to arrive during the same period. Independently, CCTV footage confirms the presence of passengers inside the airport at the time of the attack.




Times in the graphic correspond to documented events. Arrivals for XY32 and XY252 were scheduled only, because both flights were diverted away from Riyadh.

| Time | Event | Direct source |
|---|---|---|
| 13:19 / 13:36 | XY89 left the gate and then departed from Riyadh's runway for Abha | XY89 – runway and gate record |
| 14:03 / 14:07 | XY388 landed from Damascus, then reached gate 108 in Terminal 1 | XY388 – detailed historical record |
| 14:55 (scheduled) | XY32 departed Jeddah at 13:33, was due at 14:55, then diverted back to Jeddah | XY32 – diverted flight |
| Around 15:00 | Airport attack, according to a British government source | British Foreign Office |
| 15:05 (scheduled) | XY252 departed Amman at 13:32, diverted to Medina, and arrived at 16:21 | XY252 – diverted flight |

The Saudi Ministry of Information published surveillance footage, reviewed by Reuters, showing passengers queuing at a security checkpoint and others in waiting areas before and during the explosion. Reuters geolocated one camera in Terminal 3. The testimony of a female passenger struck by shrapnel near departure gates in the same terminal provides further independent confirmation of civilian presence at the time of the injury.

Finding: The testimonies and video recordings reviewed by Reuters establish that passengers were inside Riyadh airport terminals during the attack of 10 October. Flight movement records also confirm ongoing civilian operations around the time of the strike, including XY388's prior landing and the diversion of XY32 and XY252, both scheduled to arrive during the same window. The evidence confirms direct exposure of civilians to danger while distinguishing verified landings from flights diverted before arrival.

## 4. Riyadh, 8 October: Passengers and Families in the Departure Hall

Saudi aviation authorities confirmed two attacks, one affecting the airport and another a civilian aircraft. Passenger Khalid Zaal said he was waiting for a flight to AlUla scheduled to depart at 13:15. Families, a young girl and elderly people in wheelchairs were inside the departure hall when he saw a stationary Saudia aircraft struck, followed by explosions that shook the area. Saudia stated that the affected aircraft had no passengers aboard; Zaal's testimony nevertheless documents passengers in the adjacent terminal. (See the carrier's statement.)

| Flight | Actual departure | Scheduled arrival at Riyadh | Outcome and source |
|---|---|---|---|
| XY20 – Jeddah to Riyadh | 11:52 | 12:25 | Diverted to Al Qassim; arrived at 14:55 |
| XY388 – Damascus to Riyadh | 10:40 | 12:30 | Diverted to Al Qassim; arrived at 14:06 |

Finding: The attack affected a civilian aviation facility while passengers waited to depart, and aircraft already airborne for Riyadh had to divert to other airports. Eyewitness testimony establishes civilian presence during the strike, while flight records document actual diversions that day.

## 5. Dammam, 11 October: Passengers Aboard a Taxiing Aircraft as a Projectile Fell

The Saudi aviation authority confirmed an attack on King Fahd International Airport on Sunday evening. Reuters reported testimony from a person aboard a taxiing aircraft who, at approximately 20:30, saw a projectile land near parked aircraft and start a fire. The aircraft returned to the gate and passengers disembarked. This is direct testimony that passengers were aboard an aircraft at the time of the attack.

| Flight | Actual departure | Scheduled arrival at Dammam | Outcome / source |
|---|---|---|---|
| XY412 – Jeddah to Dammam | 19:02 | 20:30 | Final arrival status unknown |
| ME442 – Beirut to Dammam | 17:32 | 20:05 | Diverted to Abu Dhabi; arrived at 00:02 on 12 October |

Finding: The attack coincided with passengers aboard an aircraft taxiing on the airport surface. The scheduled arrival of XY412 aligns with the approximate time of the strike, but neither identifies it as the aircraft described by the witness nor proves that it reached the runway.

## 6. Abha, 6 October: Inbound Flights Diverted and Passengers Witnessed the Attack

The Saudi authority reported that two female residents were killed and 28 people injured in the attack. Flight movement records show two aircraft that departed for Abha and subsequently diverted. Passenger Abdul Salam Al-Omari also testified that he was in the airport when it was struck, preparing to return to Riyadh.

| Flight | Actual departure | Scheduled arrival | Outcome |
|---|---|---|---|
| XY2914 – Riyadh to Abha | 11:51 | 12:55 | Diverted to Riyadh; arrived at 15:42 |
| G9195 – Sharjah to Abha | 12:00 | 14:25 | Diverted to Jeddah; arrived at 15:32 |
| SV1664 – Abha to Riyadh | 11:35 | Originally scheduled for Riyadh at 11:05 | Arrived in Riyadh at 13:27 |

Finding: According to the testimony, passengers were present inside the airport during the strike, and departing and inbound flights operated that day. The official statement does not provide an exact attack time that would establish that a particular aircraft was landing when the strike occurred.

## 7. Dammam, 21 October: Actual Civilian Landing and Flight Diversions on the Night of the Attack

An official Saudi statement reported that an attack occurred on the evening of 21 October and that the toll rose to two deaths and eight injuries. Records for flight NP231 establish that the aircraft from Cairo actually arrived in Dammam at 22:01, while other flights were diverted that night.

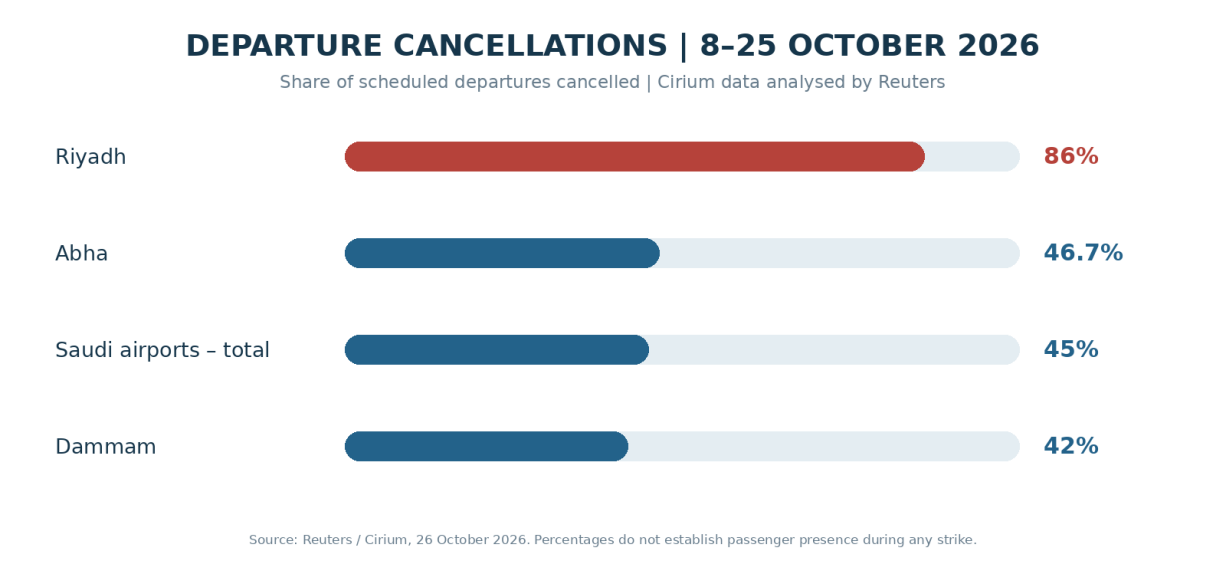
| Flight | Scheduled time | Actual movement and source |
|---|---|---|
| NP231 – Cairo to Dammam | Arrival 22:00 | Actually arrived in Dammam at 22:01 |
| XY421 – Jeddah to Dammam | Arrival 22:00 | Departed at 23:00 and diverted to Jeddah; arrived at 00:43 |
| XY408 – Jeddah to Dammam | Arrival 23:55 | Departed at 23:13 and diverted to Jeddah; arrived at 01:07 |

Finding: The airport was not out of operation throughout the evening of the attack: one arrival is documented as completed, while other flights were diverted. Since the exact strike time was not published, the overlap can be established for the evening, not for the precise minute of landing.

# 8. Additional Incidents – Jazan, Najran, August and September

| Incident | Associated flight schedule | What the evidence establishes |
|---|---|---|
| 5 October – Jazan and Najran | FAD43 – scheduled Jazan arrival 21:50; SV1856 – scheduled Najran arrival 22:45 [2] | Evening attacks overlapped scheduled night flights, but actual operation of these two flights was not established. |
| 4 August – Claim to have attacked Najran | SV1864 – scheduled 13:35 departure cancelled | The reported attack derives from a Houthi announcement; no independent Saudi attack time enables precise matching. |
| 20 August – Claim to have attacked Najran | SV1865 – scheduled 12:50 arrival; flight cancelled | Does not establish that an aircraft or passengers were present on this flight when the strike occurred. |
| 19 September – Fire near Riyadh airport | SV1664 – diverted to Medina; SV725 – diverted to Medina [2] | Diversions on the day of the threat are established, but the report does not prove that the airport building itself was hit. |

Reuters analysed Cirium data published on 26 October 2026 and reported 4,071 cancellations out of 4,736 scheduled departures from Riyadh between 8 and 25 October, or approximately 86%. Across Saudi Arabia, more than 7,800 departures were cancelled, roughly 45% of those scheduled. Cancellation rates were 46.7% at Abha and 42% at Dammam.




These percentages describe disruption to air travel between 8 and 25 October. They do not imply that passengers on every cancelled flight were present at an airport when it was attacked.

## 9. Houthi Spokesperson's Announcements: Publication Timestamps and Claims of Airport Attacks

Military announcements issued by the Houthi group are particularly relevant to the investigation as direct sources for operations the group said it conducted, the targets it claimed to attack and the weapons it claimed to use. Attribution of a particular incident, however, requires comparing the announcement with independent information on timing, location, projectile type and consequences.

SAM examined five posts by military spokesperson Yahya Saree on X dated 7, 8 and 12 October. Their local publication times were extracted from the posts' digital identifiers and converted to Saudi Arabia and Yemen time (UTC+3). These timestamps establish when the operations were publicly announced, not necessarily when the projectiles struck.

| Local publication time derived from post ID | Link to original announcement | Airport-related content |
|---|---|---|
| 7 October 05:46:31 | Open post on X | Claimed an attack on King Khalid Airport in Riyadh using several drones and alleged that air traffic had been disrupted. |
| 7 October 06:47:28 | Open post on X | Additional post related to the Riyadh targeting claim; the link and publication time were established, but the full text was not independently retrieved. |
| 8 October 15:33:01 | Open post on X | Announced an attack on King Khalid Airport with a ballistic missile “this afternoon”, alleging damage and disruption. |
| 8 October 18:45:59 | Open post on X | Claimed attacks on Riyadh airport with two cruise missiles and Najran airport with a ballistic missile, alleging disruption at both. |
| 12 October 22:01:30 | Open post on X | Claimed an attack on Riyadh airport that evening using a ballistic missile, alongside a drone attack on Khamis Mushait airbase. |

Contemporary reporting supports some elements of these statements, including Al Jazeera's reporting on the 8 October claim concerning Riyadh and Najran, and Agence France-Presse reporting on the 12 October announcement.

Publication timestamps do not establish that attacks took place at the same moments. Nor do the group's statements alone prove that all projectiles reached their intended targets or caused the damage claimed.

## Attributing Attacks: From Military Announcements to Independent Evidence

A claim of responsibility is significant evidence linking its author to an operation, but it does not eliminate the need to identify which incident the claim concerns and compare it with independent evidence.

Three levels of verification are especially relevant here. First, establishing that the Houthi group announced an attack on a particular airport on a particular date. Second, matching the announcement with an attack documented by the authorities in terms of time, location, weapon and consequences. Third, identifying the individuals and entities who planned, ordered or supervised the attack.

The five posts establish repeated Houthi military announcements about targeting Saudi airports, but do not by themselves form a complete evidentiary chain for every injury, death or instance of physical damage.

Further investigation should obtain and preserve the original announcements and their digital metadata, compare them with air-defence detections, interceptions and projectile impact locations, examine weapon fragments and expert findings, and seek evidence relating to orders and the chain of command.

The evidentiary value of these announcements differs from that of official statements confirming the occurrence of attacks or their casualties. The former show what the group claimed to have done; the latter show what the authorities recorded. A complete match between the two cannot be presumed without verification.

# 10. Aden International Airport: Attacks on Civil Aviation Through 28 October 2026

Official statements and testimonies from personnel indicate that Aden International Airport faced repeated attacks in October 2026. On 7 October, an approaching flight was diverted; on 16 October, an aircraft preparing for takeoff was evacuated; on 21 October, flights were disrupted after civilian and humanitarian aviation activity; and on 28 October, two further missile attacks took place at 13:00 and 15:00. These incidents demonstrate that the risk extended to sensitive phases of flight operations, not simply airport buildings.

The National Commission of Inquiry documented the incidents of 7, 11 and 16 October through on-site examination. The Ministry of Transport reported further attacks on 21 and 24 October, followed by two strikes on 28 October. Figures are reproduced as reported by the competent authorities because counts differ depending on whether they refer to separate strikes or days on which attacks occurred.

**A. Attacks and Flight Circumstances – Official Evidence**

| Incident and statement | Aircraft and operational phase | Established significance |
|---|---|---|
| 7 October – Ministry of Transport original statement | IY603 inbound from Cairo diverted to Jeddah minutes before landing; passengers awaiting a Jeddah departure around 03:00; two aircraft on the ground. | Missile landed near the runway as a passenger aircraft approached for landing. |
| 11 October – National Commission of Inquiry | Commission lists the incident among those it inspected; the source does not identify a flight number at the exact time. | Incident documented on site; flight-by-flight matching incomplete. |
| 16 October – Ministry of Transport | IY612 on the runway preparing to leave for Cairo was evacuated; QFF101 inbound from Cairo was airborne; impact about 500 metres from the Yemen Airways aircraft and 100 metres from the runway centreline, according to the Information Minister. | Documented overlap with one passenger aircraft on the ground and another airborne. |
| 21 October – Ministry of Transport | Following departure of IY640 to Amman and QFF102 to Cairo, and landing of a humanitarian aircraft; IY623 to Addis Ababa and IY609 to Cairo suspended. | Coincided with civilian departures, arrivals and humanitarian activity, with two flights suspended. |
| 24 October – Ministry of Transport | Missile attack on Saturday afternoon; available information gives neither a specific affected flight nor an exact time. | Another reported attack; no unverified flight is attributed to it. |

The 7 October incident is particularly significant because the diversion of IY603 was an emergency response to a specific threat near the runway, rather than a routine change in the flight's scheduled destination.

The 16 October attack provides further evidence of the proximity of projectiles to active civilian flight operations. The ministry reported evacuating a Yemen Airways aircraft preparing for takeoff while another aircraft from Cairo was airborne during the attack.

On 21 October, official records documented flight interruptions after other departures and the landing of a humanitarian aircraft, demonstrating the overlap between military danger, civilian air transport and humanitarian operations.

## B. Independent Flight Records: Movements Associated with the Attacks

| Date and flight | Time in an independent record | Technical finding and linked record |
|---|---|---|
| 7 October – IY603, Cairo to Aden | Actual departure 00:15 Cairo/Aden local time; scheduled arrival at Aden 03:30. | Flightradar24 confirms diversion to Jeddah (JED), aircraft 7O-AFD; the record shows the date as the night of 6 October in UTC. Route description in Al Araby Al Jadeed. [2] |
| 16 October – QFF101, Cairo to Aden | FlightAware: departed Cairo at 20:14; recorded arrival at 23:15 local time. The type of timestamp requires checking before treating it as an actual landing. | FlightAware record for QFF101 supports the ministry's account that an incoming aircraft from Cairo was airborne. |
| 16 October – IY612, Aden to Cairo | FlightStats: scheduled departure 03:30 in the morning; Flightradar24 displays a movement record dated 16 October before the evening attack. | FlightStats dated 16 October; Flightradar24 multi-flight record. [2] |
| 21 October – IY640, Aden to Amman | Flightradar24: departure 04:23 UTC = 07:23 local; landing in Amman 07:44 UTC = 10:44 local. | Flightradar24 record for IY640; the ministry confirms departure before the attack but does not describe it as occurring only minutes earlier. |
| 21 October – IY623, Aden to Addis Ababa | FlightStats: departure scheduled for 09:00 Aden time; no confirmed actual departure. | FlightStats record dated 21 October; according to the ministry the flight was halted and postponed. |
| 21 October – QFF102, Aden to Cairo | The operational codes used in the ministry's statement and some booking/tracking sites differ. | FlightStats record D2H102 (marked cancelled); this entry cannot be equated with QFF102 without verifying the airline and flight identity. |

Yemen's Ministry of Transport stated that the 16 October attack occurred while Yemen Airways flight IY612 was preparing to depart for Cairo and flight QFF101 from Cairo was airborne. The ministry confirmed that the aircraft on the ground was evacuated. The statement establishes the overlap between the attack and civilian aviation operations. However, the published morning movement record for IY612 does not independently corroborate the timing of the evening attack. The official statement is therefore the

evidence for the evacuated aircraft; the morning record is not presented as independent proof of the precise time of the evening strike without the airport log or aircraft records.

Counting incidents: Earlier statements in October described the attack as the “fourth”, while on 28 October the Ministry of Transport reported that the number of attacks had risen to six after two strikes on the same day. Since multiple missiles or strikes on one day can affect the count, this dossier retains the dates and times recorded in the relevant documents and does not calculate a separate overall total without a comprehensive operational log.

The following graphic presents the Aden incidents of 7, 16, 21, 24 and 28 October and their documented operational impact. It does not treat statement publication times as the times missiles landed.

The General Authority of Civil Aviation and Meteorology in Aden lists several flight numbers and routes on its flight schedules page, but the accessible page showed a schedule for a different date. Its current listings were therefore not applied retrospectively to 7, 16 or 21 October. Air traffic control logs and actual airport departure and arrival lists are still needed to distinguish recurring flight numbers and operational changes.

On 20 October, the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations of Human Rights conducted an on-site examination of Aden airport, including impact sites and damage to operational facilities and the safety of passengers and staff. It reviewed the incidents of 7, 11 and 16 October. A statement by Aden Security Administration after the 16 October attack likewise confirmed that two missiles had landed inside the airport perimeter. Yemen's Foreign Ministry condemned the risk posed to a civilian flight, passengers and staff in the earlier attack of 7 October.

## C. 28 October 2026: Two Strikes on Aden Airport, Flight Disruptions and Diversions to Djibouti

Yemen's Ministry of Transport documented two renewed missile strikes on Aden International Airport on Wednesday, 28 October 2026, placing the first at 13:00 and the second at 15:00. It described them as part of a series that, according to its statement, had reached six attacks during October. In a separate statement, the General Authority of Civil Aviation and Meteorology confirmed that both strikes targeted airport installations and facilities and endangered passengers, workers and air navigation. The airport continued to serve civilians, patients and scheduled flights.

According to testimony reported by Agence France-Presse from two sources in the Aden police, the first missile struck the airport before the Houthis issued their public call for evacuation. Yahya Saree's first post was published at 13:26:40 Aden time, about 27 minutes after the first strike time reported by the Ministry of Transport. A subsequent evacuation call cannot change the fact that the projectile preceded it, and the airport was struck again a few hours later.

At 14:53:22, the Houthi spokesperson posted a second message about seven minutes before the announced second strike at 15:00. Both publication times were derived from the posts' digital identifiers and refer to posting rather than launch. Combined with the official statement, they reconstruct the sequence of the two attacks and warnings: the first strike preceded the first published warning, while the second warning came shortly before the later strike.

| Local time | Event / post | Direct source |
|---|---|---|
| 13:00 | First missile strike, according to the Ministry of Transport | Official statement |
| 13:26:40 | Houthi spokesperson's first post among the supplied links; AFP reporting corroborates the evacuation call | Yahya Saree's first post |
| 14:04:14 | Reuters Arabic X post on developments | Reuters Arabic on X |
| 14:53:22 | Second post by the Houthi spokesperson; renewed warnings according to published coverage | Yahya Saree's second post |
| 15:00 | Second missile strike, according to the Ministry of Transport | Official statement |
| 16:28:26 | Later journalist's post about the airport; text not directly verifiable through the X interface | Samir Al-Nimri |
| 17:48:31 | Later post on developments; no unverified content attributed to it | Fares Al-Hemiari |

This chronology is central to assessing precautions before attacking a civil aviation facility. According to the Ministry of Transport's timing and the AFP-reported police testimony, the first warning followed the first strike. The interval between the second warning and the reported next attack was approximately seven minutes. These facts raise fundamental questions as to whether passengers and staff could in practice have been protected and the airport evacuated before the missiles arrived.

The consequences were not confined to the runway area. Yemen Airways, through spokesperson Hatem Al-Shaabi, announced that inbound flights to Aden would be diverted to Djibouti to safeguard passengers, crews and aircraft. The statement, also reproduced by Crater Net, said aircraft would refuel in Djibouti and complete technical and operational procedures before proceeding, subject to available permissions and arrangements, to a domestic airport in government-controlled territory to disembark passengers. They would then travel to an international airport for overnight parking and to reorganise operations.

The airline apologised for delays and route changes, warned that some flights might be postponed or rescheduled, and asked passengers to update their phone numbers to receive operational notices. The national carrier's statement demonstrates that the diversions were not hypothetical or merely a public-relations measure, but an announced operational response to danger created by the attack. Al Shorouk also quoted a field account stating that the strike damaged the runway, disrupted four scheduled departures and forced passengers, including patients and children, to leave the airport. These latter figures derive from that field account, not individually verified departure records.

Local reporting published on the day of the attack and a Ministry of Transport post on X provide additional contemporary context, while the ministry's official statement establishes the dates and times of both strikes. The agreement between government sources and Yemen Airways' announcement shows that the attack disrupted air transport infrastructure and forced the national carrier to reroute aircraft and change arrival arrangements for civilian passengers.

## Was There a Military Objective Inside Aden Airport?

The Houthi group claimed that military objectives associated with opposing forces were located near certain installations. On 28 October it alleged that a Saudi military cargo aircraft was transporting weapons inside Aden airport. That assertion does not, in itself, establish the legality of an attack, negate the presence of civilian passengers or relieve an attacker of the obligation to take feasible precautions.

Official information about the attacks of 7 and 16 October describes projectiles landing near the runway and within areas used by civilian aircraft. The material reviewed by SAM does not provide verified coordinates for each military objective the group claimed to target or sufficient information to match the alleged target with the actual impact point.

Accordingly, an assertion that a military objective was present cannot be taken as proof that an attack was lawful. Equally, a projectile falling near a passenger aircraft does not by itself prove that the aircraft was the intended target.

The established facts nevertheless provide grounds for assessing whether the attacker complied with its duty to verify targets and select methods and timing that minimise civilian risk, given the continued use of the runway and surrounding facilities by passenger aircraft.

# Al Riyan International Airport: Claimed Military Objectives and the Limits on Using Civilian Facilities

On 21 October 2026, Yemeni media reported that Al Riyan International Airport in Mukalla had been attacked by three drones. Hadramout TV said the strikes affected the runway and the electricity department. Other sources reported projectiles landing near the runway and no casualties in the initial information.

The Houthi group claimed responsibility for the attack, stating that it had targeted military equipment transported by Saudi Arabia to the airport aboard military cargo planes.

This incident requires direct scrutiny of the claimed military objective: the type of equipment alleged to be present, whether it was actually there at the time, its location within the airport, whether it made an effective contribution to military action and whether its destruction would have offered a definite military advantage in the circumstances.

Even if military equipment were shown to have been present at the airport, that would not remove the protection afforded to the runway, navigation and electricity systems, or other civilian parts that do not meet the criteria for military objectives. Nor would it remove the duty to assess expected civilian harm and take feasible precautions.

Published information lacks an independent technical examination of impact points, drone types and debris, damage severity and actual effects on civilian operations. The investigation therefore retains the group's claim and local reporting about the damage as preliminary evidence requiring technical corroboration, without finally accepting or rejecting the military outcome the group claimed.

## Claimed Targets and Impact Sites: Assessing the Legality of the Attacks

The incidents reveal an evidentiary gap between the Houthi group's descriptions of certain targets and the available information on where projectiles struck and what damage they caused. This gap is central to assessing legality: describing a facility as militarily important or claiming that equipment was present inside it does not establish that a strike was directed against a lawful military objective.

The assessment requires identifying the object the attacker intended to hit, its use at the time, its distance from aircraft, passenger terminals and runways, the type and accuracy of the weapon, and whether the attacker could direct it at a specific target without causing prohibited civilian harm.

In Aden, information from 7 and 16 October shows projectiles landing close to the runway and civilian aircraft during operations. At Al Riyan, the group claimed to target military equipment while local reports described effects on the runway and electricity facilities. At Saudi airports, the group's statements sometimes claimed attacks on the airports themselves, while authorities and passenger testimonies documented casualties and damage in civilian operating environments.

The material available does not allow the coordinates of all claimed targets and impact points to be identified or the weapons and methods used to be fully assessed. That limitation does not diminish the importance of established civilian exposure; it defines the additional evidence required to determine compliance with distinction, proportionality and precautions.

# Matrix for Assessing Claimed Military Objectives

| Airport | Claimed or described target | Evidence concerning impact location | Unresolved issue |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aden | Military positions the group claimed to have targeted | Official accounts of missiles landing near the runway and aircraft | Identification of the intended target and matching it to impact points |
| Al Riyan | Alleged military equipment inside the airport | Reports of impacts on the runway and electricity department | Proof of the equipment's presence and location, and weapon characteristics |
| Riyadh | The airport itself, in Houthi announcements | Official reports, recordings and testimonies documenting damage and passenger presence | Identification of each impact location and connection to the announcement and weapon used |
| Abha | The airport in the context of claimed attacks | Casualties, flight diversions and a passenger's testimony | Determination of the impact point and nature of the intended target |
| Dammam | Airport facilities or aircraft apron in published reports | Testimony and reports concerning projectiles and casualties | Examination of projectile origin, target and impact mechanism |

The matrix underscores that the central question is not simply whether an airport was attacked, but whether the attack was directed at a civilian object or a specific military objective, and whether its execution accounted for known or foreseeable dangers to civilians.

# Civilian Aircraft at Risk: The Significance of Attack Timing and Operational Phases

The relationship between attack timing and aircraft movements is a central aspect of this investigation. Airports are not static facilities: aircraft and passengers continually change position, while takeoff and landing require precise procedures involving runways, air traffic control, navigation and safety.

At Aden airport, the 7 October attack coincided with IY603's approach to landing, forcing a diversion. On 16 October, IY612 was evacuated while preparing to depart, as QFF101 arrived in the airspace from Cairo.

At Dammam on 11 October, a passenger aboard a taxiing aircraft described a projectile landing near parked aircraft, causing the plane to return to the gate and passengers to disembark. At Riyadh on 10 October, records confirm a civilian flight landed shortly before the attack, while passengers were inside the terminals when the explosion occurred.

These incidents demonstrate that the danger extended beyond possible damage to buildings or installations to passenger aircraft during different operational phases. Those circumstances must be considered when evaluating foreseeable harm and the precautions required.

Temporal correlation alone does not establish that the attacker deliberately chose takeoff or landing to maximise casualties. It does, however, provide grounds for investigating what information was available about aircraft movements and whether that information was considered in selecting the timing and means of attack.

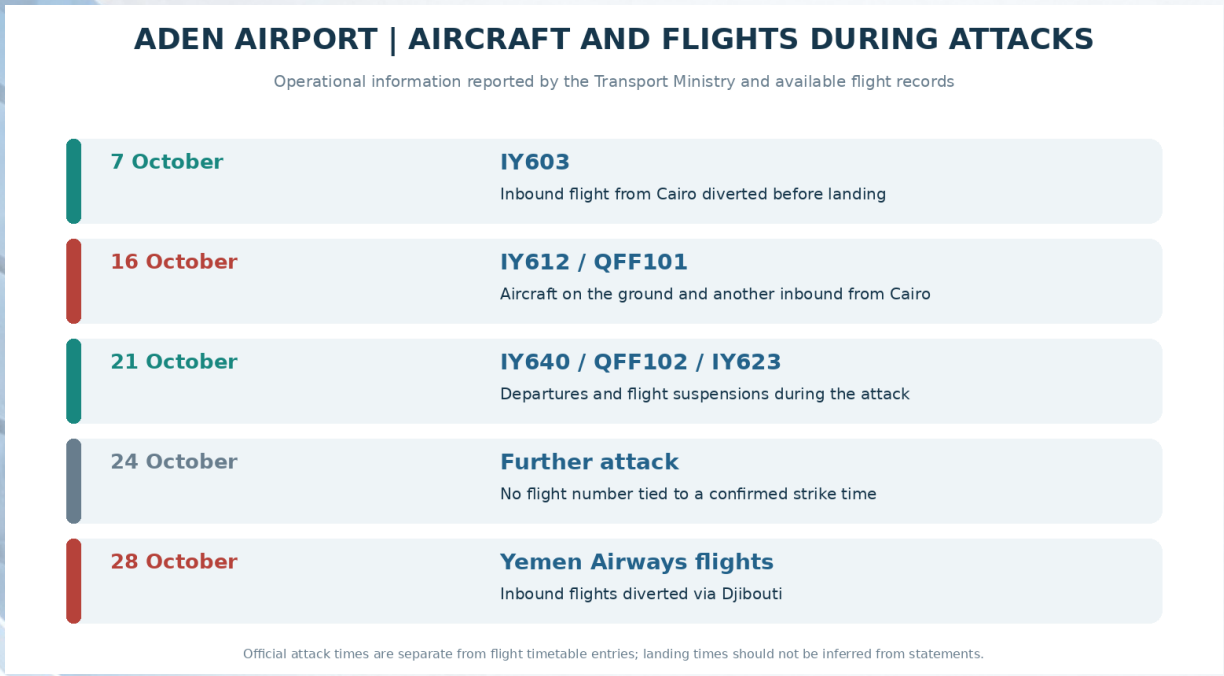
Warning records, aviation notices and operational orders should also be examined to determine whether attacks were suspended or rescheduled when indications emerged of aircraft or passengers within the danger area.

The principal finding of this section is that civilian aviation activity at the time of the attacks was not incidental; it was a material circumstance in assessing foreseeable risks and the attacker's conduct under international humanitarian law.

# 11. Scale of the Disruption to Air Navigation

The effects were not limited to projectile impact sites. They included suspended operations, diverted and cancelled flights, disruption to scheduled air transport and repeated risks and uncertainty for passengers and workers.

According to Reuters' analysis of Cirium data published on 26 October, 4,071 of the 4,736 scheduled departures from Riyadh between 8 and 25 October were cancelled—approximately 86%. Across Saudi Arabia, cancelled departures exceeded 7,800, approximately 45% of the total scheduled. Rates at Abha and Dammam were 46.7% and 42%, respectively.




These figures demonstrate extensive disruption to aviation during the period, but do not independently establish how much disruption was caused by any individual attack. Separating causes of cancellation would require reviewing operational suspension decisions, aviation notices, aircraft rerouting and restrictions imposed by aviation regulators.

In Yemen, disruption to airports has a particular humanitarian dimension because transport alternatives are limited, road travel is difficult and patients, students, families and humanitarian agencies depend on aviation. Flight diversions and suspensions can delay travel for medical treatment, raise transport costs and interrupt essential services.

The investigation does not automatically attribute all such consequences to every attack because detailed records of patients, humanitarian flights, affected bookings and alternative transport costs are unavailable.

Further investigation should collect information on the number of passengers directly affected, length of delays, cancelled or postponed medical evacuations and disrupted humanitarian services, while protecting the personal data of passengers and patients.

## 12. Human and Humanitarian Harm: From Casualties to Lost Livelihoods and Interrupted Treatment

Houthi missile and drone attacks on civilian airports in Yemen and Saudi Arabia during October 2026 caused loss of life and humanitarian harm extending into the lives of victims and their families. The damage went beyond deaths, injuries and physical harm to aviation facilities. Official tolls for separate attacks on Saudi airports record dozens killed and hundreds injured, across several nationalities, including passengers and civil aviation workers. In the 10 October attack on King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, the death toll rose to 13 after an injured person died of their wounds, and more than 300 injuries were recorded. The 21 October attack on King Fahd International Airport in Dammam killed two people and injured eight. These figures concern people engaged in ordinary civilian activities, and the losses extended to their families, livelihoods and stability.

Published testimonies reveal the human tragedy obscured by casualty figures. Saudi student Lamis Al-Asiri was preparing to return to Abha with her mother after a medical visit to Riyadh when King Khalid International Airport came under attack on 10 October. According to her father, contact with both was lost after the explosions; he was later informed of his daughter's death and found her body at a hospital. Her mother survived shrapnel injuries and fractures requiring treatment. In the same attack, Saudi national Saud Manahi Al-Sarrah lost his daughter Aroub while her sister Tala was injured. Preparations for a family wedding gave way to mourning and anxious efforts to learn the injured relatives' condition. These experiences show how one attack caused death and injury within families, leaving survivors and relatives with enduring physical and psychological consequences.

The losses also reached migrant workers' families whose livelihoods depended on remittances. Bangladeshi worker Shahid Ahmed, 35, was killed at Riyadh airport after speaking with his two children and planning to return home to reunite the family. His wife and children lost their principal source of income. The family of Palestinian Talal Al-Dhahni, 63, also lost a father of six and a key source of financial and emotional support. On 11 October, Pakistani baggage handler Rizwanullah Khan was killed while working at Riyadh airport. He left a wife, three children and elderly parents who relied on his income. These cases demonstrate cross-border economic and social harm to families deprived of those who met their basic needs.

The attacks also affected people travelling for religious or medical reasons and workers in civil aviation. Bangladeshi teacher and imam Nasrullah Al-Badr was killed while accompanying a group of 44 Umrah pilgrims travelling to Jeddah, leaving three children without their father. Egyptian flight attendant Azza Ramzi Mohamed Hassan, 28, was killed while working at Riyadh airport, days before her planned wedding. These cases show that the danger encompassed passengers, aircrews and airport employees whose work required them to be present at these facilities.

The effects extended beyond immediate casualties to disruption of travel and access to health care and humanitarian services. Reuters' analysis of Cirium data showed 4,071 cancellations among 4,736 scheduled departures from Riyadh between 8 and 25 October, a rate of approximately 86%, while more than 7,800 departures were cancelled across Saudi Arabia. In Yemen, repeated attacks on Aden airport suspended some flights and diverted others, compounding the difficulties faced by patients and wounded people requiring treatment abroad amid limited alternatives and costly overland travel. On 26 October, Médecins Sans Frontières confirmed that a missile landing near Aden airport disrupted the departure of an aircraft carrying humanitarian personnel, who had to shelter inside the airport. The incident is especially significant given humanitarian organisations' reliance on aviation to move personnel and medical supplies to areas with deteriorating health services. Available data cannot establish the total number of patients whose treatment was delayed, but do confirm interruptions to civilian and humanitarian transport and the related risks to access to essential services.

The humanitarian effects also reached residential neighbourhoods around Aden airport, where repeated explosions frightened children and families and disrupted daily life. An Al Jazeera Net investigation documented the testimony of a mother living near the airport in Khormaksar with her two daughters. She described the panic experienced by her ten-year-old daughter when explosions occurred and the family's preparations to leave home for fear of renewed shelling. On 30 October, Al Jazeera English also published residents' accounts of children experiencing sleep disturbances, some pupils missing school, and families temporarily moving farther from the airport. SAM considers these accounts evidence of psychological and social harm extending beyond the explosions themselves, affecting civilians' sense of safety and ability to live normally.

SAM for Rights and Liberties concludes that the effects of Houthi attacks on civilian airports cannot be reduced to casualty figures or physical damage. Families lost breadwinners, children lost parents, injured people required treatment, passengers had journeys disrupted, humanitarian personnel faced danger, and nearby residents lived with the threat of repeated strikes. These consequences must inform assessments of foreseeable civilian harm and necessary precautions, as well as investigations into responsibility and efforts to secure victims' and families' rights to medical care, remedy and reparations.

## 13. Knowledge of Risk: A Disciplined Legal Assessment

The evidence reviewed by SAM demonstrates that the Houthi group continued attacking civilian airports in Yemen and Saudi Arabia during October 2026 despite their ongoing use for passenger transport and scheduled civilian flights. Flight records, witness testimony and video footage establish that several attacks occurred with passengers inside the facilities or civilian aircraft in sensitive operational phases, including approach, takeoff preparations and taxiing. At Aden, the 7 October attack forced an approaching passenger flight to divert; during the 16 October attack, an aircraft preparing to depart was evacuated. Direct evidence also shows passengers in Riyadh airport terminals during the 8 and 10 October attacks and aboard a taxiing aircraft in Dammam on 11 October. Records further document actual flights and diversions in Riyadh, Abha and Dammam.

Houthi military announcements and warnings to travellers add to the evidence of the group's awareness of foreseeable civilian risks. On 11 October, the group publicly warned passengers, airlines and workers at Saudi airports, demonstrating its awareness that the facilities it said it intended to attack served civilian purposes and were used by passengers and staff who could be harmed. Nevertheless, attacks continued, including two strikes on Aden airport on 28 October, the first of which occurred approximately 27 minutes before the Houthi warning was posted, according to the Ministry of Transport's times. Foreseeability of civilian harm does not require the attacker to know individual passengers' names or flight numbers: the nature, function and actual use of airports make these risks apparent or readily foreseeable.

SAM stresses that these facts undermine any general suggestion that targeted airports were free of civilians or that danger to them could not reasonably have been foreseen. International humanitarian law requires parties to distinguish civilian objects from military objectives, assess expected civilian harm and take feasible precautions to avoid or minimise it. Houthi claims that military objectives or equipment were present in airports do not, by themselves, make the attacks lawful unless the specific objects targeted met the criteria for military objectives. Nor do civilian facilities throughout an airport automatically become military objectives because of alleged military use in one part. Warnings do not relieve the group of the obligations to verify targets and comply with distinction, proportionality and precautions.

SAM concludes that continued Houthi attacks on airports, despite the known civilian functions and ongoing presence of passengers and aircraft, together with casualties, damage and disruption, reveal a recurring pattern of exposing civilians and civilian objects to danger. Corroborated evidence—including operational records, testimonies and military announcements—provides substantial grounds to investigate possible violations of international humanitarian law, identify those who ordered, planned and executed the attacks, and hold responsible persons accountable for unlawful attacks established by the evidence.

## 14. Earlier Pattern, 2017–2021: Knowledge of Civilian Risks

Repeated Houthi attacks on Saudi airports have documented precedents relevant to assessing the group's awareness of civilian risks. The UN Panel of Experts addressed the 4 November 2017 attack on King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh in report S/2018/594. In report S/2022/50, the Panel documented 18 attacks on Abha airport between 2018 and 2021, resulting in two deaths and 77 injuries.

These precedents are relevant when compared with the attacks of October 2026 and the Houthi group's 11 October warnings to passengers, airlines and airport workers in Saudi Arabia. They support inferences that the group knew the airports' civilian character and the foreseeable dangers to their users.

Foreseeability of harm does not depend on knowing passengers' names or flight numbers, and general warnings do not exempt an attacker from the obligations of distinction, proportionality and precautions. While repeated attacks do not alone establish criminal intent in each case, they reinforce the need to investigate attacks carried out despite prior awareness of civilian risks and the adequacy of measures taken to avoid them.

In report S/2018/594 (Annex 64, Addendum C), the UN Panel of Experts examined the attack on King Khalid International Airport at 20:07 on 4 November 2017 and considered the foreseeability of civilian consequences when a low-accuracy missile is used against a civilian airport. In report S/2022/50 (Annex 17), the Panel documented 18 successful attacks on Abha airport between April 2018 and August 2021, resulting in two deaths and 77 injuries. These precedents show that passengers and airport staff had repeatedly faced documented danger before the 2026 escalation.

# Civilian Objects and the Limits of Military Necessity: Legal Assessment and Responsibility

Civilian airports benefit from the protection afforded to civilian objects under international humanitarian law. Articles 48, 51 and 52 of Additional Protocol I of 1977 establish the principle of distinction and prohibit attacks on civilians and civilian objects and indiscriminate attacks; Article 57 requires feasible precautions in attack. These principles also apply as customary law in both international and non-international armed conflicts. The presence of military activity inside an airport does not automatically remove protection from the entire facility. A particular object must meet the criteria for a military objective, and that status does not extend automatically to other civilian parts of the airport.

The documented attacks on Aden, Al Riyan, Riyadh, Abha and Dammam raise serious questions about compliance with these rules, especially where passengers and civilian aircraft were present and projectiles struck near runways and operational facilities. Houthi statements claiming military sites or equipment were targeted do not in themselves establish legality. Investigators must verify the existence and use of the alleged objectives, the accuracy of the weapons, whether expected civilian harm was excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, and the precautions taken to prevent that harm.

Flight records, passenger testimony and repeated Houthi announcements are important in assessing foreseeability of civilian risks and prior knowledge of them. Warnings issued to passengers and airlines do not remove an attacker's legal obligations. Protection of civil aviation also engages the safety rules of the Chicago Convention of 1944, while international humanitarian law remains the primary framework for assessing the legality of attacks during armed conflict.

SAM considers that the documented incidents provide substantial grounds to investigate the Houthi group's responsibility for the attacks attributed to it and possible violations of distinction, proportionality and precautions. Deliberate attacks on civilians or civilian objects may amount to war crimes where the requisite legal elements are established. Determining individual criminal responsibility requires linking military announcements with technical evidence, identifying intended targets and those who ordered or carried out the attacks, and examining command responsibility where its legal requirements are met, so that accountability rests on reliable and verifiable evidence.

## Conclusions

SAM for Rights and Liberties concludes that Houthi attacks on airports in Riyadh, Abha, Dammam and Aden during October 2026 endangered civilian aircraft and people at facilities operating actual passenger flights. The 28 October attack on Aden is particularly revealing: the Ministry of Transport confirmed strikes at 13:00 and 15:00, while AFP reported that the first missile struck before the Houthis issued an evacuation call. The sequence makes the timing, content and practical consequences of warnings central to evaluating required precautions.

At Aden airport, the Ministry of Transport documented the diversion to Jeddah of flight IY603 from Cairo before it could land on 7 October, followed by the evacuation of IY612 while preparing to depart for Cairo on 16 October as inbound QFF101 remained airborne. The ministry's 21 October statement also reported aircraft movements and the suspension of other flights. On 28 October, Yemen Airways confirmed diversions of flights inbound to Aden via Djibouti following two missile strikes documented by the ministry.

Posts by the Houthi military spokesperson on X provide timestamped evidence of claims to target airports. The 28 October Aden incident is especially important: the Ministry of Transport placed the first strike at 13:00, but the first warning was published at 13:26:40, followed by another at 14:53:22 before a second strike around 15:00. AFP's account confirms that the first missile preceded the evacuation call, raising direct questions about the effectiveness of warnings and precautions to protect civilians.

SAM for Rights and Liberties finds that, through its repeated attacks on civilian airports, the Houthi group violated the rules of distinction, proportionality and feasible precautions under international humanitarian law and directly endangered passengers, staff and civilian aircraft. Claims that military objectives or equipment were present inside airports are insufficient to justify the attacks. Flight tracking data and operational records establish that passenger aircraft and civilians were present at Aden airport during strikes. Prior statements and threats to attack the airport further demonstrate the group's awareness of the risks to civilians and its determination to continue despite them. Those announcements do not relieve the Houthis of the duty to verify the nature and location of targets or take necessary precautions to protect civilians.

SAM holds the Houthi group, its leaders and those who ordered or executed the operations responsible for endangering civilians and civilian objects, and stresses that intentional attacks against them may constitute war crimes when the legal elements are met. It calls for an independent investigation into every attack, including a review of air traffic control and civil aviation records, ground movement recordings, aircraft track data, and forensic examination of projectile fragments and impact sites, linked to military announcements, orders and chains of command. Such evidence is essential to establish responsibility and hold perpetrators accountable; gaps in documentation must not be used as a pretext to shield responsibility for attacks that the evidence establishes.

## Recommendations

In light of the investigation's findings, SAM for Rights and Liberties calls for urgent measures to stop unlawful Houthi attacks on civilian airports, ensure compliance with international humanitarian law and protect passengers, airport workers and civilian aircraft.

SAM calls on the Houthi group to immediately cease attacks against civilians and civilian objects, refrain from indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks, and fulfil its obligations to verify targets and take feasible precautions during military operations. Allegations of military objectives within airports or warnings to travellers do not absolve the group of its legal responsibilities.

SAM urges the competent authorities in Yemen and Saudi Arabia to conduct independent and effective investigations into the documented attacks, preserve physical and digital evidence—including air traffic control and aircraft movement records, videos and projectile fragments—identify the entities and individuals responsible, and pursue appropriate legal measures to hold them to account.

It also calls on the United Nations and international civil aviation bodies to support independent technical investigations, document harm to airports, aircraft and passengers, and strengthen measures to ensure that civilian and humanitarian air transport can continue safely.

SAM underscores the need to guarantee victims' and families' rights to truth, remedy and reparations, protect witnesses and personal information, and take measures to prevent these violations from recurring.

Witness and Impact

SAM Rights & Liberties

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