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The United Arab Emirates - a new front of the war in Yemen

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Iran-backed Houthi rebels have carried out two attacks by drones and missiles against targets in the UAE. The attacks are a serious escalation and expansion of the battlefield that has so far focused on Yemen and attacks on targets in Saudi Arabia by the Houthis.

The Iranian-backed Houthi rebels have claimed responsibility for the attacks, but it seems that the Houthis would not have carried out such attacks with regional strategic implications without Iran's consent or perhaps even under its direction.

The missile attack that was thwarted on January 24, 2020

The United Arab Emirates' defense ministry said it has shot down two Houthi missiles targeting the country. There were no injuries from the shrapnel which fell in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.¹

Emirati ambassador to the US Yousef Al-Otaiba said on January 24, 2022, that the UAE cooperated closely with the US to thwart the missile attack on Abu Dhabi. ²

The Houthis said they targeted Abu Dhabi's Dhafra airbase as well as "vital and important" locations in the Dubai area, with military spokesperson Yahya Saree saying in a televised statement that the attack had "achieved its objectives with high accuracy and we are ready to expand the operation during the next phase and confront escalation with escalation".³

United Arab Emirates forces have destroyed the launch site from which the Iran-backed Houthi militia fired two missiles toward Abu Dhabi. An F-16 fighter jet struck the location in al-Jawf, in northern Yemen.⁴

The attack on oil storage facility and an airport in Abu Dhabi

On January 17, 2022, Iran-backed Yemeni Houthi rebels launched attacks by drones and missiles against targets in the UAE. Three people were killed and six others injured in Houthi drone and missile attack on an oil storage facility and an airport in Abu Dhabi. That same day Saudi Arabia's air defense shot down nine drones that the Houthi rebels launched at the Kingdom. The attack on Abu Dhabi follows the Houthis' seizure of a UAE flagged ship off the coast of Hodeidah, Yemen's main port, on January 3, 2022.⁵

Saudi Arabia's deputy defense minister Khalid bin Salman took to Twitter to blast the Houthis and the group's backers in Tehran. "The terrorist attack by the Iran backed Houthis against [Saudi Arabia] & the U.A.E. represents a threat to our region's security. The Houthis aren't interested in peace and remain hostage to their regional backer, which treats our region's security as a mere negotiating card."⁶

The Houthis have frequently launched cross-border missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia; however, this was the Houthi's first successful and deadly attack on targets in the UAE.⁷

Emirati investigation has reportedly found that Yemen's Houthi rebels used a mix of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones in the deadly attack on an oil site and airport in Abu Dhabi.⁸

UAE's ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, said that cruise missiles and ballistic missiles alongside drones were used in the deadly attack on the United Arab Emirates, which intercepted part of the attack.⁹

The blasts struck three petroleum transport tankers near a storage facility for the Abu Dhabi National Oil Co. (ADNOC) in the Musaffah area. The neighborhood, 13 miles from the center of Abu Dhabi city, also has an oil pipeline network and 36 storage tanks, from which transport trucks carry fuel nationwide. A fire also broke out at the construction site of the UAE capital's new airport extension.¹⁰

The location of the ADNOC storage facility where the tankers caught fire is approximately 1,100 miles northeast of Saada, the Houthis' stronghold in Yemen.¹¹

The Houthi rebels claimed responsibility

The spokesperson for Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack. The Houthi group's military spokesman Yahya Saree said in a statement broadcast on the group's Al Masirah TV channel: "The armed forces carried out ... a successful military operation within the framework of an operation named Yemeni Hurricane." Saree said the attack involved five ballistic missiles and several drones.¹²

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The missiles and drones had been launched at Abu Dhabi and Dubai airports, an oil refinery in Abu Dhabi's Musaffah area and other "sensitive" targets in the UAE. ¹³

Saree warned foreign companies, citizens and residents of the UAE to stay away from vital sites, saying they are renewing their warning to "countries of aggression that they will receive more painful and painful blows."

Iran - has refrained from official and public reference to the recent attacks by the Houthis, but it spoke on what it described as "recent Yemen-linked developments" by saying military attacks were not the solution. ¹⁴

In statements made in Tehran after meeting Iranian officials, including President Ibrahim Raisi, Houthi militia's spokesman and head of its delegation, Muhammad Abdul Salam, vowed to launch more attacks against the UAE. ¹⁵

Iraq's Iran-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia 'congratulated' the Houthi militia for its drone attack on the UAE's capital Abu Dhabi. The Shia militia's leader Qais al-Khazali said "We congratulate the oppressed brothers in Yemen [the Houthis] on the glory and steadfastness. They are defending their country and their people against the unjust aggression of an unjust coalition". ¹⁶

Khazali, who is himself designated by the US as a global terrorist' said that "We warn the rulers of the UAE... against the consequences of their continuing interference in internal Iraqi affairs and sowing seeds of strife and division among our honorable people," he said. ¹⁷

Asaib Ahl al-Haq was designated as a terrorist organization by the US in 2020, and the State Department said it was heavily funded and trained by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force.

Previous Houthi claimed attacks on UAE

The Houthis have claimed previous attacks on Abu Dhabi's airport, as well as the emirate's Barakah nuclear power plant — claims that Emirati officials have denied in the past.¹⁸

The Houthis issued a warning to the UAE and Saudi Arabia in November 2017, claiming that it could retaliate against the lead partners in the Saudi coalition, after Saudi Arabia and the UAE expanded its siege on Yemen as a response to a Houthi missile attack on Riyadh. "All airports, ports, border crossings and areas of any importance to Saudi Arabia and the UAE will be a direct target of our weapons, which is a legitimate right," read a statement released by the Houthis' political office.

"False" drone attack on Barakah nuclear power plant

The Houthis claimed an attack on the United Arab Emirates' Barakah nuclear power plant on December 3, 2017. The Barakah nuclear power plant is located 230 km southwest of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. According to a report in the Saba news agency, the missile hit the Barakah nuclear power station, which was under construction.¹⁹

The National Emergency Crisis and Disaster Management Authority, NCEMA, has denied the Houthi claims. In a statement, NCEMA emphasized that the UAE's air defense system is capable of dealing with any threats.²⁰

"False" drone attack on Dubai Airport

On August 27, 2018, the United Arab Emirates, said air traffic was normal after "false" reports that the Houthi militia in Yemen had targeted Dubai Airport with a drone.²¹

Houthi-run media said earlier that a drone had targeted the facility, but did not provide any evidence and there were no reports of damage or casualties.²²

In July 2018, the militants made a similar claim about targeting Abu Dhabi airport, which was denied by the UAE.

The reasons for the attack

The United Arab Emirates was a key member of the Saudi-led coalition that supports Yemen's government against the Iran-aligned Houthi rebels. Although the UAE has decreased the number of troops it has on the ground in 2019, it continues to be actively engaged in the war and supports key militias fighting the Houthis. It also cooperates closely with the United States in counter-terrorism operations in Yemen.²³

The Houthis have come under pressure in recent months and are suffering heavy losses as Yemen's government-aligned forces, aided by the UAE-backed Giants Brigade and with help from Saudi air raids, reclaimed the entire 17 districts of Shabwa province from the Houthis earlier this month and made advances in nearby Marib province.²⁴ The Houthis attributed such losses to UAE and its proxy warfare in Yemen.

The January attacks against Abu Dhabi was a clear message to show that no one is safe and that the Houthis have the capabilities to hit all the countries in the area. ²⁵

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The attacks on Abu Dhabi were also Iran's message to the US and the western powers that in the absence of an agreed solution to the issue of nuclear talks, Iran can destabilize the Middle East and harm the interests of the West and its allies in the region.

The response of the UAE

The UAE wrote a letter to the UN Security Council condemning Yemen's Houthi attack on Abu Dhabi which killed three people and said the Iran-backed militia "spreads terrorism" in the region.²⁶

The UAE has asked the US to reinstate its designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization in response to the attacks. US President Joe Biden said his administration is considering re-designating the Houthis as an international terrorist organization following the attack on the UAE.²⁷

President Joe Biden's administration revoked a terrorist designation of the Houthis introduced by former President Donald Trump in January of last year. Biden also announced in ending US support for the offensive operations of the Arab Coalition, led by Saudi Arabia, which intervened in Yemen in 2015.²⁸

The response of the Arab coalition

The Arab Coalition has launched airstrikes on Houthi targets in response to Houthi attacks on UAE. The coalition attacked Houthi targets north of Yemen's capital Sanaa and killed Houthi leader Major General Abdullah Qassem al-Junaid.²⁹

Houthi state-run media reported that more than 24 airstrikes were launched by the Saudi-led coalition in 24 hours on various areas in Yemen, causing heavy material damage.

The "Rwabee" affair

Earlier this month, a UAE-flagged cargo ship, "Rwabee," was hijacked by the Houthis. The ship was on its way from Socotra Island in Yemen to the port of Jazan in Saudi Arabia, carrying medical equipment used in a field hospital on the island.³⁰

The UAE said the "Rwabee", whose 11 crew are now hostages, was a "civilian cargo vessel" and called the hijacking a "dangerous escalation" in the busy Red Sea shipping route.

The Houthis rejected a UN Security Council demand for the ship's immediate release, saying it was "not carrying ... toys for children but weapons for extremists".³¹

International responses to the attack

Many governments expressed solidarity with the UAE in the immediate aftermath of the 17 January attack. From, Israel, Russia, Turkey, the UK, France, and other Western governments to many Arab states, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Officials worldwide used strong language to condemn the Houthi "terrorist" attack against the UAE.

Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, offered "security and intelligence" support to the UAE after Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi militia launched an attack on Abu Dhabi.³²

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The US - National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said his country will hold the Houthi group accountable after they claimed responsibility for the incident, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned the attacks in a phone call with his Emirati counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed.³³

The UN Security Council blasted the Iran backed Houthis for the “heinous terrorist attacks in Abu Dhabi. "The members of the Security Council condemned in the strongest terms the heinous terrorist attacks in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on 17 January, as well as in other sites in Saudi Arabia," a statement from the Security Council said. The Security Council expressed its condolences to the families of the victims killed from India and Pakistan, and wished a speedy and full recovery for those injured.

The members also reaffirmed that “terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constitutes one of the most serious threats to international peace and security.”³⁴

Senior representatives from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Oman met on January 26, 2022, to discuss Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthis’ attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The five countries have condemned the Houthi attacks, which targeted civilian sites in the Kingdom and Emirati capital Abu Dhabi, and reaffirmed support for both Gulf countries’ national security.³⁵

Concluding Remarks

The Houthi attacks on UAE are a serious escalation in the 7 years' war in Yemen. The Houthis have launched the attacks as a retaliation for recent military activities by UAE-aligned groups and their recent losses on the

ground in Yemen, but their threats to hit the UAE's homeland have been going on for years.

The 17 January attack hurt the UAE's reputation as a safe and stable Middle Eastern country and there are potential ramifications for the UAE's position in the Middle East as a business and Tourism hub.

The UAE has to take seriously the Houthi threats that this will not be the last of such attacks and that the Houthis might make this more routine, like how the Yemeni rebels have spent years waging drone and missile strikes against neighboring Saudi Arabia.³⁶

The Gulf states have long accused Tehran of fanning the flames of violence in the Middle East through financial and military support to its network of Shia proxies in the region, specifically in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

It is not yet clear if Iran is behind the attack, or if it was a Houthi decision, but it seems that the Houthis would not have carried out such attacks with regional strategic implications without Iran's consent or perhaps even under its direction.

The attacks on Abu Dhabi can be considered as Iran's message to the big powers that in the absence of an agreed solution to the issue of nuclear talks, Iran can destabilize the Middle East and harm the interests of the West and its allies in the region.

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