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Houthi Attack on the UAE | Iran Attempting to Dictate the Deterrence Equation

by Avi Melamed

Information

On January 17, 2022, an oil depot facility near the Abu Dhabi international airport was attacked apparently by assault drone(s). As a result of the attack, three people were killed, and six were injured. A Houthi military spokesman in Yemen claimed the Houthis carried out the attack.

Background: The War in Yemen

Yemen is one of the most strategically located countries on the globe. At the southwestern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, its 1,200-mile-long shoreline straddles the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Red Sea. Yemen is a tribal society, a fact that dictates its society, politics, and economy. The [Shi'ite](#) Houthi tribes, traditionally based in northern Yemen, account for 35 percent of Yemen's population and are a significant political entity. Like all other players in Yemen, the Houthis are looking for the strongest cards to secure their political position.

In **September 2014**, the Houthis, backed by Iran, executed a coup in Yemen. They ousted the Yemenite government led by [Sunni](#) President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and took over Yemen's capital, Sana'a. Hadi's ousted government relocated to Aden, the southernmost point in Yemen on the Gulf of Aden.

Iran has a network of agents and proxies—terror armies—across the Middle East. Iran provides arms, financing, military hardware, training, and support to its proxies and agents.

In the case of the Houthis, Iran supports *Ansar Allah*, "The Supporters of God"—the Islamist military wing of the Houthis. Iran provides the Houthis with increasingly advanced ballistic and cruise missiles and long-range unmanned aerial vehicles. Through supporting the Houthis, Iran has gained significant influence in Yemenite politics, and has a foothold on the ground in Yemen, on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Red Sea. This is a staggeringly powerful position for Iran and a danger for the region and the world.

In **March 2015**, concerned with an Iranian takeover of Yemen and following the failure to reach a diplomatic solution, Saudi Arabia and the UAE led a Sunni military coalition to restore Hadi as president and prevent Iran from taking control of Yemen. **Since 2015**, Yemen has increasingly become a stage for a Saudi-Iranian military confrontation. The war has expanded to other areas such as the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Sea, and the Red Sea. Since 2016 the Houthis have launched countless attacks on Saudi Arabian cities using ballistic missiles and attack drones.

In **January 2021**, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo designated Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthis, including three of the group's leaders— Abdul Malik al-Houthi, Abd al-Khaliq Badr al-Din al-Houthi, and Abdullah Yahya al-Hakim—as foreign terrorists. On January 19, 2021, the designation went into effect one day before President Joe Biden's inauguration.

President Joe Biden put Yemen at the top of his list of priorities when he entered office in January 2021. He was resolutely determined to end the war and put an end to the severe humanitarian crisis in Yemen. One of the first steps the Biden administration took in **February 2021** was to overturn the Trump administration's decision to define the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization. At the same time, the administration decided to freeze the delivery of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia, but in parallel stressed that the United States was committed to the defense and security of Saudi Arabia. Through these actions, the administration sought to prepare the groundwork for ceasefire talks to end the war.

The new administration's efforts produced the opposite results. The Houthis repeatedly rejected all US initiatives to achieve a ceasefire. And the war escalated.

In **February 2021**, the Houthis launched a widespread offensive military attack on the oil-rich Yemenite city of Ma'rib (southeast of Sana'a). Ma'rib is one of Yemen's largest cities. And many of its 1.5 million residents are people who have been dislocated because of the war and sought refuge in the city.

In parallel, Iran and the Houthis significantly escalated their aggression against Saudi Arabia.

Analysis: The Attack on UAE was an Iranian Attempt to Dictate the Deterrence Equation

The background for the Houthi attack on the UAE is a recent significant development in the war in Yemen.

On **January 12, 2022**, the Arab military coalition announced it liberated large parts of the Shabwah Governorate. The coalition also announced that it was embarking on a broader military operation they named 'Freedom of Happy Yemen' (*Huriat Al-Yaman al-Sa'id*).

The January 17, 2022, attack on Abu Dhabi was likely approved by Iran to achieve two primary Iranian interests:

1. Iran wants to establish a deterrence equation.

Tehran wants to stop the Arab coalition forces' military momentum in Yemen. Should the coalition forces gain the upper hand in the war, this could lead to a collapse within the Houthi ranks, compromising Iran's hold over Yemen.

In that regard, it should be noted that accumulating information indicates that the Houthis have sustained significant casualties in the fighting in the Ma'rib Governorate (which began in February 2021). According to Arab coalition sources, **since June 2021**, 14,000 Houthi militants have been killed in the fighting in the city of Ma'rib and the Ma'rib Governorate. Though it is hard to confirm the accuracy of those figures, it should be noted that according to a United Nations report on the war in Yemen published in **January 2022**, the Houthis are recruiting children between the ages of 6 and 17 to fight within their ranks. According to the report, between 2020 and June 2021, more than 2,000 children recruited by the Houthis were killed. These figures may indicate that the Houthis have sustained large-scale fatalities.

It should also be noted that Iran has tried the strategy of dictating a deterrence equation in other arenas – in maritime theaters such as the Arab / Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and in land arenas, such as Iraq and Syria. One of the cornerstones of Iran's hegemonic ambitions to become the regional superpower is a "Shi'ite / Iranian Crescent" from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, and Yemen. The backbone of the Iranian Crescent is a land corridor the Iranians have been attempting to secure from Iran to the Mediterranean. Israel is determined to prevent the creation of a militarized Iranian Land Corridor on its northern border. Therefore, Israel consistently attacks Iran's military infrastructure in Syria. Against the mounting damage the Israeli attacks caused and to prevent Israel from attacking its assets in Syria, the Iranians tried to use Tehran's largest and most powerful proxy, the Lebanese Hezbollah, to establish a deterrence equation with Israel. The Iranian tactic has failed.

2. Tehran's other goal in attacking the UAE oil facilities was to signal to the Western powers that Iran has pressure cards and that it will not hesitate to use violence to secure its interest and thwart sanctions or retaliation.

It is not a coincidence that Iran decided to send that powerful signal while the talks about the Iranian nuclear program are taking place in Vienna.

Once again, the attack on Abu Dhabi illustrates the great danger that the Iranian regime presents to the region.

The model of using agents and proxies has been a good strategy for Tehran. It has allowed the regime to gain power and wield influence. While, at the same time, Iranian leaders stay safely at home—far away from the death, destruction, and havoc that results from its determination for regional hegemony.

Through its network of proxies and agents, Iran continues to skillfully use these tried-and-true mechanisms of inciting violence and capitalizing on the chaos to advance its aggressive expansion policy and establish, deepen, and entrench its influence throughout the Middle East. And Tehran has been quite successful in its endeavor. So much so that Iranian leaders boast that they control four Arab state capitols—Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Sana'a. And to a large extent, it does.

Assessment: Potential Ramifications of Iran's Attack on the UAE

In my new book [*Inside The Middle East – Entering A New Era*](#), as in the previous volume and many articles I have published over the past decade, I have repeatedly warned about the danger Iran presents to the region and the world.

The UAE is a global economic center, and the heart of that center is oil and financial services.

The global community must understand the severity of the mullah regime taking the UAE hostage. The international community must respond decisively. The address for the response is Iran.

Unfortunately, it seems that western circles fail to internalize this understanding. And some of them unwaveringly insist on protecting the Iranian regime. Those circles should be aware of the Iranian regime's "double game." For example, in December 2021, Iran hosted the United Arab Emirates' National Security Advisor. Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed al-Nahyan met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. Iranian officials repeatedly stated Iran's desire to have a good relationship with its Arab neighbors. That said, the Arab Gulf monarchies and most of the Arab world distrust the mullah regime in Tehran. The attack on the UAE proves their distrust to be well placed.

In recent years, there have been voices in the Arab world calling for establishing a NATO-style Arab military alliance to contain the Iranian threat. On January 17, 2022, shortly before the Houthis attack on the UAE, Saudi veteran journalist, Abdulrahman al-Rashed, echoed that idea in his article [War with Iran is the More Likely Scenario](#). His timing was impeccable.

To a certain extent, such an alliance exists. I call it the Alliance of Moderation - an undeclared military alliance between the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. One of the primary reasons for the formation of that alliance is the severe and escalating Iranian threat. This alliance aims to present an effective and coordinated response to the Iranian threat. The attack on Abu Dhabi illustrates the necessity of this alliance and will likely strengthen it.

In that context, it should be noted that on the morning of January 18, less than a day after the attack on the UAE, Israel conducted a successful flight test of the Arrow 3 interceptor weapons system designed to intercept ballistic missiles and attack drones.

In the current public discourse across the Middle East, the United States is increasingly viewed as a declining power that is withdrawing from the region. Right now, eyes across the Middle East and around the world are on the United States. Leaders and the public at large are waiting to see what the United States' response will be to Iran's brazen attack on the United Arab Emirates. This is a significant – and profoundly troubling milestone. Iran's attack on the UAE presents the Biden administration with a critical test.

Avi Melamed is an intelligence analyst and author. His next book, "Inside The Middle East: Entering A New Era," is scheduled to be published in February 2022. www.avimelamed.com | Avi@AviMelamed.com | [@AviMelamed](https://twitter.com/AviMelamed)