

Houthi Strikes on UAE Open Another Front in Yemen War

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Brief Analysis

As Emirati-aligned forces gain ground on the battlefield in Yemen, the Houthis are trying to raise the costs of Abu Dhabi's involvement.

On January 17, a series of suspected Houthi drone strikes targeted fuel trucks at Musaffah, an industrial zone just outside Abu Dhabi city, along with a construction site at the capital's international airport. Video [footage \(https://twitter.com/anesmansory/status/1483054619924340737\)](#) posted on Twitter showed massive, billowing clouds of black smoke in Musaffah. Initial reports suggest three people were killed (two Indian nationals and a Pakistani) and six injured, marking the first known deaths inside the United Arab Emirates stemming from the Yemen conflict.

What Spurred the Attack?

Given the Houthis' tit-for-tat [targeting strategy \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-messaging-may-hint-targeting-pattern\)](#) and their warnings last week of an attack on the UAE, the incident is not a surprise—but it is an escalation. In announcing responsibility for the strikes, the group said that it targeted various locations in the UAE (including the Abu Dhabi and Dubai airports) with many missiles and drones. It also framed the incident as a response to recent military activity by UAE-aligned groups in key Yemeni conflict zones.

In the past week, under the banner of a new coalition operation, the Amaleqa (Giants) Brigades and their allies pushed the Houthis out of critical parts of Shabwa province in the south and began contesting parts of Marib as well. The Houthis have long fought to control Marib, a critical energy-rich province and the last major northern stronghold for the Yemeni government. Their recent setbacks—which they blame on the UAE's reentry into the war—will make a Marib takeover much more difficult.

Since the UAE withdrew from Yemen in 2019, it has retained only a small counterterrorism contingent on the ground and claimed not to be involved in anti-Houthi operations. In recent weeks, however, U.S. officials and various local fighters **have reported (https://www.wsj.com/articles/yemens-houthi-rebels-claim-suspected-drone-strikes-on-u-a-e-capital-11642416716?mod=Searchresults_pos1&page=1)** that Abu Dhabi is once again ramping up its air operations and support to anti-Houthi groups such as the Giants Brigades, which it helped found and initially fund. After playing an instrumental role in liberating the west coast from the Houthis earlier in the war, the Giants Brigades recently redeployed to Shabwa as part of what appears to be a joint Emirati-Saudi strategy. Their success on the battlefield seemingly provoked the Houthis, who chose to retaliate directly against the UAE on its territory, likely in a bid to drive the Emiratis back out of the military fight.

Implications for UAE Policy on Yemen and Iran

The UAE prides itself on being a safe and economically vibrant place to live in an otherwise volatile region. As such, it has generally shown zero tolerance for externally motivated attacks against expatriates, who make up some 90 percent of the population and are central to the economy. Many recall the shocking 2014 case of the so-called “Reem Island Ghost,” a radicalized woman who stabbed a Hungarian-American kindergarten teacher to death and was summarily executed for it. Continued Houthi-led attacks on UAE soil over the long term could chip away at this carefully cultivated reputation for safety.

In the shorter term, the key question is how the UAE will respond in Yemen. Emirati leaders were likely aware that reentering the fray might provoke the Houthis, and they no doubt heard last week’s public threats of retaliation. So will Abu Dhabi continue supporting its allies in Yemen to push forcibly against the Houthis, perhaps even doubling down in a bid to fully retake Marib? Or will it back down in line with its more recent, less interventionist foreign policy?

The UAE’s relationship with Iran may be tested as well. The two countries have held high-level negotiations in the past few months with the goal of easing regional tensions. Now observers are wondering whether Tehran had any role in or knowledge of this attack. On one hand, the Houthis often make decisions independent of Iran despite the country’s ample support for the group. On the other hand, any Iranian attempts at plausible deniability may be undermined by reports suggesting that top Houthi negotiator Mohammed Abdulsalam was in Tehran meeting with President Ebrahim Raisi and Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani. The nature and scope of the strikes also conjure up memories of the 2019 attack on major oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, which was initially claimed by the Houthis but later deemed to have probably come from Iran. Regardless, Tehran’s close relationship with a group that is now actively targeting the UAE will likely become central to the Iranian-Emirati talks if they continue.

U.S. Considerations

American officials are no doubt studying the flight path of the suspected drones and missiles closely. Just a few miles south of Musaffah sits al-Dhafra Air Base, where U.S. troops and equipment are deployed. Washington will want to know where the drones and missiles originated, how far they flew, and whether any air defense systems were engaged. According to the latest UN Panel of Experts report on Yemen, which was widely leaked, the Houthis now claim to possess advanced drones capable of flying up to 2,000 kilometers, which would put Abu Dhabi International Airport within range of launch points in Sanaa. But an accurate hit from that distance would still be difficult.

Whatever the case, U.S. officials will be particularly concerned about the attack on Abu Dhabi’s airport—an international travel hub where Americans often fly or transfer. After a Houthi-claimed drone strike there in 2018, the nature of the latest attack may be worrisome enough to reopen internal U.S. discussions about **designating** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-terrorism-designation-more-likely-deliver->

famine-and-entanglement-leverage) the group as a foreign terrorist organization or levying additional targeted sanctions on its members.

Meanwhile, the ramping up of coalition military activity in Yemen may resurrect the Washington debate over the best way forward in that conflict to protect U.S. interests. The Biden administration publicly opposes offensive operations there, which is in line with the UN view. In fact, Hans Grundberg, the UN special envoy for Yemen, recently lamented that the coalition and the Houthis are “doubling down on military options.” Yet as some U.S. officials and analysts conclude that the Houthis are unwilling to negotiate, they might inevitably see a military option as a way to prevent Yemen from falling to the group—especially if said campaign is led by the UAE. Any such option is incompatible with current U.S. policy, however. If Abu Dhabi chooses to remain engaged in Yemen, its involvement will likely have an outsize impact on the conflict’s trajectory in the near term, and the Biden administration may face renewed pressure over its standing policy.

The attack on the UAE will also resurrect past questions about whether the United States should protect its Gulf allies from Houthi projectiles, and how it can do so while opposing their offensive operations in Yemen. The Biden administration has been carefully threading this needle with Saudi Arabia for some time, and it may now have to do the same with the UAE.

Elana DeLozier is the Rubin Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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