

A New Phase in the Yemen War: Context and Consequences

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Brief Analysis

Recent Houthi attacks on the UAE shed light on the latest developments in the Yemeni war, and how key actors will maneuver in the coming months.

Seven years after the Yemeni civil war began and created one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, the Houthis opened another front targeting industrial zones airport construction sites near Al-Dhafra air base in Abu Dhabi. This escalation was an expected reaction to the UAE's recent re-engagement in the conflict and caused further fighting between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis. A continued escalation is especially likely if Houthi forces continue to lose ground after pro-Hadi forces and coalition-backed militias—including the UAE-backed Giants Brigade—pushed Houthi forces back in January after months of Houthi gains.

Understanding Houthi Motives

In contrast to their repeated attacks on Saudi Arabia, the Houthis have—until recently—refrained from targeting the UAE. At times, UAE support for the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the Joint Forces militias has benefitted the Houthis' interests, especially in the fight for Marib. As a result, the Hadi government has questioned the UAE's approach to the Yemeni conflict, resulting in [tense relations \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-idUSKCN1SF0EM\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-idUSKCN1SF0EM) between the two on several different occasions. Even so, Abu Dhabi has been one of the most powerful actors in Yemen's war, and its role in the conflict is a question of considerable significance for the Houthis' strategic aims.

The Houthis' new approach towards the UAE is likely a response to the Giant Brigades shifting role in the war. While the militia initially served as a peacekeeping force between anti-Houthi groups, it recently pivoted to actively participating in battles against Houthi forces. The successes of the Giant Brigades in these efforts made headlines in Yemeni news outlets, contributing to Houthi fears that the Brigade's prestige would yield further victories following the Coalition's recapture of Shabwa. The Houthis targeted the UAE to counter these on-the-ground advances and boost the morale of their own supporters.

Development of Houthi Drones and Ballistic Missiles

A month after the initial UAE attack, there has been no apparent follow-up towards the UAE itself, though the UAE intercepted drones from an Iraqi-based group likely affiliated with the Houthis on February 2. Still, the Houthis have underscored their capacity to hit targets in the Emirates. The deployment of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) has become an increasingly prominent element of the Houthi strategy; in the two years since taking control of Sana'a, Houthi forces have deployed numerous UAVs against their local adversaries and against the Saudi-led coalition. Since the attack on Abu Dhabi, Houthi-launched UAVs and ballistic missiles attacks against Saudi Arabia have continued, including the latest attack on Abha airport on February 10. Houthi forces have also deployed UAVs locally, perhaps most notably in December 2020 when the group targeted the Aden airport as new government officials arrived in the Hadi government's interim capital.

According to the Conflict **Armament Research group (<https://www.conflictarm.com/dispatches/evolution-of-uavs-employed-by-houthi-forces-in-yemen/>)**, four types of Houthi-made combat UAVs have been identified: Qasef-1, Qasef-2K, Sammad-2, and Sammad-3. Qasef drones have an estimated range of 150-200km, and are therefore most likely to be used against local targets. The Sammad drones have an estimated reach of over 1500km, making it possible to reach Abu Dhabi or even Dubai from Houthi-held territories. The Houthis obtained these weapons from Yemeni government stockpiles during their partnership with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh between 2014 and 2017. Some **analyses (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/responding-irans-arms-smuggling-yemen>)** suggest that Iran has also supplied these weapons to the group.

The threat of future UAV attacks is especially potent in a country like the UAE, which fears losing its image as a safe destination in the region and derives most of its income from tourism and foreign investment. Naturally, the Houthis' demonstrated capacity to reach Abu Dhabi with UAVs has created regional concerns about the Houthis' growing power.

The Response

Houthi attacks on the UAE will continue to impact the trajectory of the war and opportunities for peace. Since the attack on Abu Dhabi, the coalition has increased its air strikes on Sanaa, including the Saudi-led bombing of a prison in Sanaa in the days following the attack on the UAE and the coalition's **targeting (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-led-coalition-asks-civilians-yemeni-ministries-sanaa-evacuate-state-media-2022-02-13/>)** of Sanaa's telecommunications compound on February 14, which was used by the Houthis to carry out drone attacks, according to the coalition.

However, efforts to deter Houthi strikes on their northern neighbors may not reach their intended effects; the Houthis have shown no indication that they intend to permanently cease their UAV attacks. Moreover, escalation of airstrikes by both sides is likely to result in harsh consequences for civilians in both Yemen and the UAE, continuing the ongoing fighting in the country.

Abu Dhabi continues to use diplomatic pressure as a tool against the Houthis. In recent weeks, the Emiratis have increased efforts to isolate the Houthis on the international state by asking allies such as the Biden administration to re-designate the group as a terrorist organization. Recent Houthi maneuvering indicates that American troops stationed at Al-Dhafra air base are clearly within reach of Houthi drones. In this context, both the UAE and Saudi Arabia are pressuring the President Biden to reinstate the Trump-era designation, which current administration revered upon taking office.

Yet the U.S. position on the matter is complicated. On the one hand, the Biden administration has taken a series of defensive steps in response to Houthi targeting of the UAE: on February 12, [US F-22 fighter jets \(https://apnews.com/article/houthis-abu-dhabi-united-arab-emirates-middle-east-dubai-6435d9d38ecc374955d28778f69da65c\)](https://apnews.com/article/houthis-abu-dhabi-united-arab-emirates-middle-east-dubai-6435d9d38ecc374955d28778f69da65c) arrived at Al-Dhafra air base, where American troops are located. The American naval ship *USS Cole* has been dispatched to Abu Dhabi, and CENTCOM commander General Frank McKenzie traveled to Abu Dhabi, promising that the United States would help replenish UAE interceptors for shooting down incoming missiles.

This most recent development comes at a precarious time for U.S. policy in the region. At present, the Biden administration is primarily focused on striking a nuclear deal with Iran, navigating a resolution to the Ukraine crisis, and dealing with Saudi Arabia's rejection of its request to increase oil production. These concerns likely trump any focus on Yemen's ongoing war. While the United States announced sanctions on what they called a Houthi and IRGC financing network on February 23, the Biden administration did not reinstate the previous designation of the Trump administration. At best, the Biden administration may warn the Houthis against further escalation while trying to convince their political leaders that a complete victory over the whole northern territory of Yemen is an unrealistic military goal.

There is already a suspicion in the region that the United States will abandon its allies, driven by the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. If Washington chooses to respond neutrally to direct attacks on its Gulf allies, trust among traditional U.S. partners may decrease further and prompt allies to look elsewhere when responding to the Yemeni crisis.

What's next for Yemen?

Ultimately, factors within Yemen will drive the long-term future of this conflict. Over the last seven years, normalization of war has caused fighters on both sides to view the war as a typical source of employment, and Yemeni fighters are driven by consanguinity, money, or revenge – factors differing from those affecting decision-makers in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. On a strategic level, the Houthis will become more powerful as they continue to build ties with tribal elites. Until the Houthis accept that they cannot take over all of Yemen, the war and the humanitarian crisis will drag on. Therefore, escalation between the Houthis and the Emiratis will likely become a protracted challenge for Abu Dhabi.

Given these internal factors, the most rational way out of the Yemeni dilemma is to calm Houthi tensions with the Gulf States and enforce an international ban on foreign support to all local militias, then reattempt a national dialogue between Yemenis in which each party gets adequate government representation. However, movement forward will require all parties to accept this rationale—a process that has proven very difficult indeed. ❖

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