

Striking Back:

Iran and the Rise of Asymmetric Drone Warfare in the Middle East

by [Kenneth McKenzie Jr. \(/experts/kenneth-mckenzie-jr\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Kenneth McKenzie Jr. \(/experts/kenneth-mckenzie-jr\)](#)

Gen. Kenneth McKenzie Jr. (USMC, Ret.) served for over forty years in uniform, including senior positions with the Joint Staff and U.S. Central Command, which he headed from 2019 to 2022. He is currently executive director of the Global and National Security Institute at the University of South



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The regime's drone and missile forces pose a stark threat to the Gulf states and Israel, necessitating a firmer, more cohesive U.S.-led response.

Iranian drone strikes, as exemplified by the September 2019 attack against Saudi Aramco facilities, have jolted Middle East leaders and revealed Tehran's long-range precision strike capabilities. The regime's large and growing drone force, which can be used for reconnaissance or strike missions, now poses an existential threat to the Gulf states and a direct threat to Israel, as does its formidable missile force. Moreover, Iranian drones transferred to Russia have had a significant impact on Moscow's war against Ukraine. In the bigger picture, advances in drone technology have produced an inflection point in aerial warfare—comparable to the introduction of manned flight more than a century ago—that has ended the guarantee of U.S. air superiority over its forces and bases.

Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. explores the contours and consequences of Iran's drone activities in this timely Policy Note. To counter the Islamic Republic, the former CENTCOM commander recommends an approach centered on clearer U.S. communication about its goals for the region, tighter collaboration with partners and allies, and enhanced efforts to counter Iran's drone fleet, along with its ballistic missiles and cruise missiles.



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