

Possible Iranian Links to the Claimed Houthi Missile Launch Against the UAE

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Dec 4, 2017

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Brief Analysis

Early signs indicate that the rebels may have attempted to strike an Emirati nuclear site with an Iranian cruise missile -- a claim that could heighten international pressure on Tehran and raise the stakes of the regional conflict if confirmed.

On December 3, Houthi rebels in Yemen announced that they had fired a "winged cruise missile" at the construction site for al-Barakah nuclear power plant, located 230 km southwest of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. UAE military authorities dismissed the claim, asserting that no strike was launched in their direction and that any missile would have been intercepted by their defenses if it had entered Emirati airspace. Yet the Houthi-affiliated television channel Al Masirah **later showed footage (http://almasirah.net/gallery/preview.php?file_id=10367)** of a cigar-shaped missile with a strap-on jet engine and booster rocket launched from what seemed to be a mobile platform. Its purported target was al-Barakah; the launch apparently ended in failure based on social media reports.

Apart from its claimed target, the nature of the weapon itself raises important questions about Iran's relationship with the Houthis. The missile bore the unmistakable shape of a Soumar cruise missile, Tehran's copy of the Russian Kh-55 (according to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, several Kh-55s were smuggled to Iran through Ukraine sixteen years ago). Al Masirah's footage indicates that Iran may have supplied the missile to the Houthis, though one cannot dismiss the possibility that Yemen obtained Kh-55s on the black market in the past, and that the rebels seized some of them during the war.

Iran's defense minister inaugurated the Soumar production line in spring 2015. According to Germany's *Die Welt*

newspaper, the missile's first field test was conducted in January 2017, during which it flew 600 km. The Kh-55 from which the Soumar is copied has a maximum range of 2,500 km and can travel at speeds up to 860 km/h. The UAE's al-Barakah site is about 1,100 km from the closest possible launch site in Yemen, so a Kh-55 traveling at close to top speed would need around an hour and twenty minutes to reach its target, with most of its trajectory passing through Saudi Arabia, the UAE's main ally in the Gulf coalition opposing the Iranian-supported Houthis. Yet cruise missiles generally fly low (approximately 100 meters from the ground in the Kh-55's case) and are difficult to detect, depending on the guidance system. It is unknown what kind of system guided the missile in al-Masirah's footage.

If the Houthis' claimed launch involved a Soumar, then it was presumably smuggled to them using a yet to be determined scheme. Considering the range-to-size advantage of cruise missiles over ballistic missiles, smugglers affiliated with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force or navy would find it easier to transfer the former. In any case, confirmation of cruise missile smuggling would represent a major escalation in Iranian assistance to the Houthis.

As for what happened to the December 3 launch, social media images have shown **broken missile parts** (<https://twitter.com/michaelh992/status/937288018905452545>) stretching no further than al-Jawf governorate in northern Yemen, indicating that the missile failed early in its claimed journey. Interestingly, one of these images showed an intact fragmentation warhead -- a strange choice for a strike on a nuclear site, though the Houthis are hardly in a position to custom-order warheads for specific targets.

Although the claimed strike failed -- and may even have been fabricated by the Houthis entirely given their past exaggerations about weapons systems -- the potential danger of future long-range cruise missile attacks from Yemen should not be dismissed. Such weapons are more difficult to counter than ballistic missiles, and launching them against the UAE could force Gulf partners to adopt **more costly and complicated missile defense systems** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/countering-irans-missile-proliferation-in-yemen>) to counter a multi-front threat.

This episode might also put Iran's missile program under further scrutiny, though the regime will likely continue to pursue its rearmament efforts and deterrence rhetoric aggressively regardless of diplomatic pressure. This attitude was highlighted on November 25, when deputy Revolutionary Guards commander Hossein Salami directly threatened to hit Europe with extended-range ballistic missiles if EU leaders continued calling for negotiations over Tehran's development efforts on that front.

Finally, any evidence that Iran has given the Houthis a Soumar missile -- one of its newest and most advanced weapons -- would likely signal that Tehran is seeking a strategic partnership with the rebels in order to hit back at the Saudi-led coalition and Yemen's internationally recognized government. Now that the late Ali Abdullah Saleh's camp -- which controls most of the missile systems -- is reportedly drifting away from the Houthis, Iran's direct support for them can be expected to grow in importance in the coming months.

Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.

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