

Attacks against the United Arab Emirates: Issues for Congress

March 16, 2022

Overview

In early 2022, the Iran-backed, Yemen-based Ansar Allah/Houthi movement (“the Houthis”) launched several missile and drone attacks against targets in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), killing three foreign nationals. Targets in the UAE included Al Dhafra Air Base, which hosts the United States Air Forces Central (AFCENT) [380th Air Expeditionary Wing](#). In Congress, Houthi attacks against the UAE have renewed debate over whether to redesignate the Houthis as a [Foreign Terrorist Organization \(FTO\)](#). President Trump designated the Houthis as an FTO in January 2021; President Biden reversed that decision citing [concerns](#) that the designation could impede the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Houthi-controlled areas. The Biden Administration has designated [individual Houthi leaders and financiers](#) and said [a review is underway](#) regarding redesignating the group.

In addition to debating sanctions, [some lawmakers](#) have called on the Biden Administration to demonstrate greater U.S. commitment to helping Gulf partners defend themselves. To date, the Administration has dispatched additional military assets to the UAE, such as a squadron of [F-22 Raptors and the guided-missile destroyer USS Cole](#). The UAE may be exploring additional purchases of missile and counter-drone defense systems from the United States or U.S. partners, [such as Israel](#). However, the UAE has also drawn closer to China and Russia, with some Emirati analysts [publicly questioning](#) the U.S. commitment to the Gulf. U.S.-UAE relations have been [tense](#): the United States is seeking greater [Emirati cooperation](#) in condemning Russia’s actions in Ukraine and [boosting global oil supplies](#), while the UAE has remained open to relations with multiple great power rivals.

Background

In Yemen, [Houthi military setbacks](#) at the hands of UAE-backed local militia may have led to escalatory Houthi aerial assaults on UAE targets in early 2022. Since 2020, the Houthis have advanced in Marib governorate against the last northern stronghold of Yemen’s internationally-recognized government. By late 2021, Houthi forces had made significant territorial gains, [alarming](#) Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two primary backers of anti-Houthi forces in Yemen. The UAE subsequently deployed its local militia

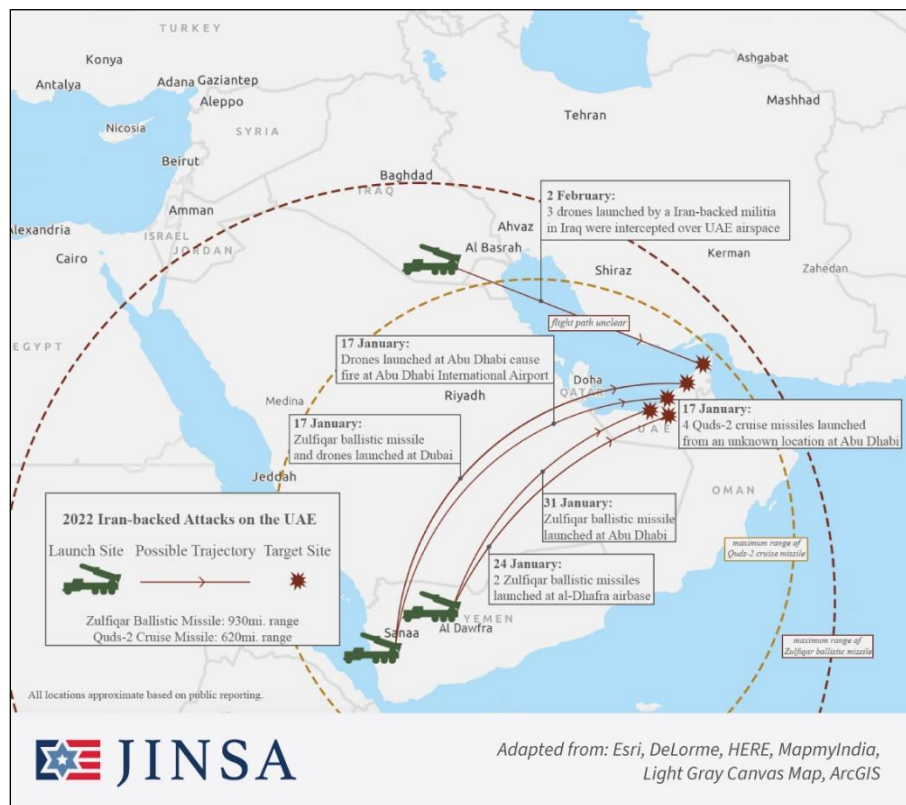
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force—the Giants Brigade—to the area; the UAE-backed militia recaptured the governorate of Shabwa and severed some Houthi resupply lines to Marib.

Figure I. Attacks against the UAE



Source: Jewish Institute for National Security of America, Iran's Unprecedented Wave of Attacks Against the UAE, February 10, 2022.

Notes: This graphic is based on press reports and CRS cannot independently verify the origins, sponsors, and means of attack.

Within a month, the Houthis began targeting the UAE. In January 2022, the group seized a UAE-flagged commercial vessel, the *RWABEE*, off the coast of Yemen. Weeks later, the Houthis launched Iranian-designed ballistic missiles (*Zulfiqar*), cruise missiles (*Quds-2*), and unmanned aerial vehicles (*Samad-3*) toward military and civilian UAE targets. According to [one Houthi leader](#), “The goal of striking the heart of the U.A.E. is to deter it.... We advise the U.A.E. to learn from this lesson...” The Houthis’ January 30 missile attack on the UAE, which Emirati forces successfully intercepted with the U.S.-supplied Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, came during the [visit of Israeli President](#) Isaac Herzog to Abu Dhabi.

U.S. Response

The U.S. State Department condemned the Houthi attacks and reiterated “[unwavering commitment](#)” to the security of the UAE. Asked whether the United States “was siding” with the UAE in the Yemen conflict, [State Department Spokesperson Ned Price responded](#) that U.S. military aid to the UAE “in no way replaces our emphasis on the diplomacy because we know only through a diplomatic end to this conflict will we be able to address the humanitarian concerns in Yemen...but also the threat that our partners face emanating from Yemen.” U.S. defense officials have pledged to [replenish](#) the UAE’s supply of missile interceptors.

FTO Debate in Congress

Following the attacks, [the UAE sought congressional support](#) for redesignating the Houthis as an FTO, though only the Executive Branch can make FTO designations. Some lawmakers [advocate](#) a redesignation, [arguing](#) that the FTO designation removal has “emboldened the Houthis to escalate their attacks and block reconciliation efforts in the country.” Other lawmakers [oppose](#) such action, arguing that a redesignation would “have little practical impact on Houthi leaders but would deepen the country’s economic collapse [and] obstruct humanitarian assistance for millions of Yemenis facing famine.”

Under U.S. law, private importers are not exempt from criminal liability for material support to an FTO ([18 U.S.C. §2339B](#)), including commercial food imports (which account for [90% of Yemen’s food supply](#)). [According to one source](#), the DOJ claims that it rarely, if ever, has pursued prosecution for material support when related to humanitarian activities. However, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and financial institutions [can be risk-averse](#) without more substantial assurance that they will not face legal or economic consequences for their activities.

Possible Broader Implications

Successive Administrations have considered the UAE [a key U.S. security partner](#): the United States has over 2,000 military personnel on Emirati soil, and some lawmakers have praised [deepening ties between Israel and the UAE](#). Nevertheless, U.S. officials increasingly view growing UAE ties to China and Russia as problematic. Emirati officials have [expressed frustration](#) with delays in the sale of U.S. F-35 aircraft and MQ-9 drones to the UAE (a \$23 billion [arms deal](#) proposed under the Trump Administration). The Biden Administration has sought safeguards to ensure that U.S. technology transfers to the UAE are not vulnerable to Chinese espionage, but officials stated that the United States [remains committed](#) to the sale. [Congress has directed](#) the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to assess whether safeguards implemented by the UAE are “viable and sufficient to protect technology of the United States from being transferred to China or other third parties.” [The UAE recently purchased its first-ever Chinese fixed wing military aircraft](#) for its otherwise U.S. - and French-equipped air force.

After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the UAE abstained from a draft United Nations Security Council Resolution condemning Russia’s actions, possibly in order to achieve [Russian support to adopt a resolution](#) renewing U.N. sanctions on Yemen, which explicitly refers to the Houthis as a terrorist group. Another [report](#) suggests that the Emirates abstained from the resolution in order to express displeasure with the U.S. response to the Houthi attacks.

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