

# Iran's Drone Offensive

Ari Cicurel  
Senior Policy Analyst

*Since the start of 2022, Iranian-backed militias have escalated their attacks, predominantly using drones, against U.S. service members and regional partners. On January 17, in a major expansion of the Yemeni conflict, the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels launched a combined ballistic and cruise missile and drone strike against the United Arab Emirates (UAE), killing three. Earlier in the month, Shia militias tied to Iran launched a spate of rocket and drone attacks surrounding the second anniversary of the U.S. strike that killed Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. This wave of aggression spotlights the need for strong American leadership that leverages the Abraham Accords, as detailed in JINSA's report [A Stronger and Wider Peace](#), to build a layered air defense architecture that includes improved counter-unmanned aircraft systems (C-UAS) and research and design (R&D) for new weapons and technologies.*

## What Happened?

- In a significant escalation of their [strikes on Saudi Arabia](#), the Iranian-backed Houthis [targeted](#) the UAE on January 17 with five ballistic and cruise missiles and three drones in attacks that killed a Pakistani and two Indians and injured six others when a petroleum tanker [exploded near the Abu Dhabi port](#).
  - » According to Houthi commander [Brigadier General Yahya al-Sari](#), “Operation Hurricane Yemen targeted the Musaffah oil refinery and Abu Dhabi Airport with four Quds 2 cruise missiles. A Zulfiqar ballistic missile also targeted Dubai Airport. In addition to the mentioned targets, Samad-3 drones also attacked a number of other sensitive and important targets.”
  - » The strikes were apparently in retaliation after the Giants Brigade, an Emirate-backed militia, [won a victory](#) in the oil-rich province of Shabwa that could cut off Houthi supply lines.
  - » In response, the [Saudi-led coalition struck San'a](#), Yemen's Houthi-occupied capital, which killed twelve people and injured eleven, according to Houthi-run media.
  - » Muhammad al-Bukhaiti, a member of the Houthis' political bureau, [made clear](#) that “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. Otherwise, our strikes will continue. And its ability to withstand such strikes is much weaker than that of Saudi Arabia.”

- » U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [condemned the Houthi attack](#) and promised to “work with the U.A.E. and international partners to hold them accountable.... Our commitment to the security of the U.A.E. is unwavering and we stand beside our Emirati partners against all threats to their territory.”
- » The attack against the UAE comes shortly after the Houthis’ seized an Emirates-flagged ship on January 3, which the UN Security Council has [demanded the group release](#).
- Iranian-backed Shia militias in Iraq and Syria launched multiple attacks, particularly through drones, against positions hosting U.S. servicemembers in the days surrounding the second anniversary of the U.S. assassination of the Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani.
  - » On January 3, U.S. Counter Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar (C-RAM) shot down [fixed-wing suicide drones](#) at the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center (BDSC), a State Department facility near the Baghdad airport. C-RAM also intercepted a [fixed-wing drone](#) outside Al Asad Airbase on January 6.
  - » Two suicide drones that targeted the Al Asad Airbase in western Iraq, which hosts U.S. troops, were [likely intercepted by U.S. Coyote drones](#) on January 6.
  - » On January 15, three drones [targeted Balad Airbase](#), an Iraqi base that has an American contractor presence and used to host American service members. The drones flew away after Iraqi forces fired at them.
  - » In addition to the drone strikes, on January 4 and 5, militias [launched](#) four 240 mm rockets at military positions hosting U.S. personnel near the Baghdad airport, targeted the U.S. Green Village base in Syria likely with Katyusha rockets, and [launched](#) five 240 mm rockets at the Al Asad Airbase.
    - U.S. forces launched [preemptive fire](#) to destroy rocket launch sites in Syria and the attack on the Green Village base prompted [U.S. retaliatory artillery fire](#).
  - » At least [three rockets](#) targeted the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on January 13, with C-RAM intercepting two and one landing in a school.

## Why Is It Important?

- Iranian-linked drones present the greatest immediate threat to U.S. servicemembers, partners, and interests in the Middle East. They have increased since January 2021 and, as indicated by the most recent attacks, are likely to continue escalating absent significant U.S. action to deter future attacks through forceful retaliation and/or defend against them with an effective, layered, and regional air defense network.
- As negotiations to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) potentially reach their [end point](#) in the next few weeks, Iran has encouraged its partner militias in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria to target U.S. service members and partners to increase its leverage at the negotiating table in Vienna and drive American forces out of the region.
  - » Iran’s concerted use of proxy attacks to pressure the United States during nuclear negotiations stands in stark contrast to the absence, and even relaxation, of U.S. pressure on Iran. Not only has the United

States largely failed to respond, or done so in a cursory manner, to Iranian-linked attacks on its troops, the Biden administration has also lifted some sanctions against its proxies and stopped enforcing others.

- The Biden administration [removed the Houthis](#) from the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) sanctions list in February 2021 (leaving some individual leaders on the list) as part of its efforts to rebalance relations with Saudi Arabia and deescalate the conflict.
- At a JINSA webinar on January 19, the UAE Ambassador to the United States announced that the Emirates will request the Biden administration [redesignate the Houthis as an FTO](#), which President Biden said he is [considering](#) at a press conference later that day.

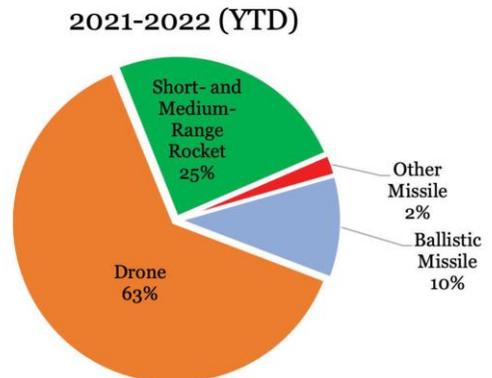
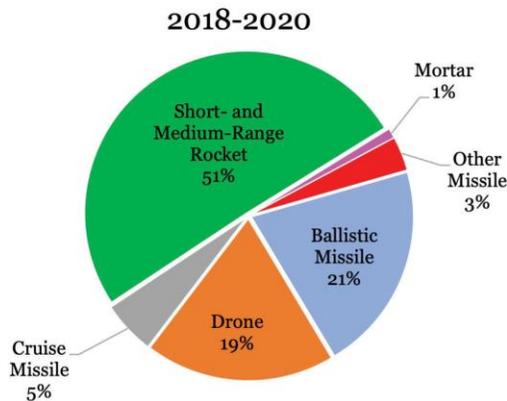
» As a result, Iran has been able to cling to maximalist and unworkable demands in the Vienna negotiations, such as a U.S. assurance that a [future administration would not withdraw](#) from the voluntary executive agreement. While at times Western officials have suggested that the talks are moving too slowly to achieve a positive outcome, the Biden administration continues to engage in negotiations indefinitely.

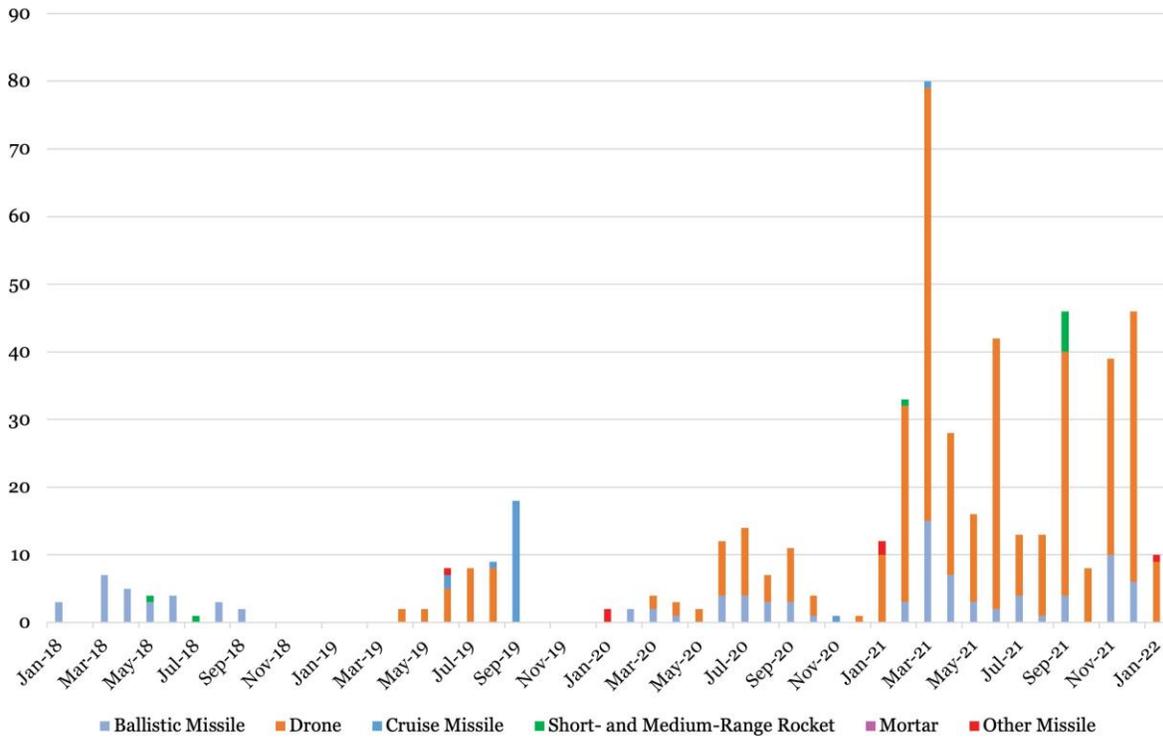
» JINSA’s [Erasing the Leverage Deficit: How to Keep Tehran from the Bomb](#) outlined a comprehensive Plan B strategy to put more pressure on Iran if the talks in Vienna fail.

- Iranian-backed militias, particularly the Houthis, have increased the number of drones they launch in attacks since the beginning of 2021. According to JINSA’s [Iran Projectile Tracker](#), drones account for sixty-seven percent of the weapons that Iranian partners used in attacks during 2021 and 2022, compared to just nineteen percent between 2018-2020.

» The Houthis have launched over four hundred projectiles, most of them drones, at Saudi Arabia in 2021 and 2022.

» Attacks on the UAE, however, are relatively rare. The Houthis have claimed to strike the UAE but the Emirates have [denied those allegations](#).





- The United States has developed a variety of C-UAS but has been unable to deploy them in sufficient quantities, no single system has the ability to track and intercept the wide range of drone threats, and the military lacks an integrated layered C-UAS architecture.
  - » C-RAM, which has been [deployed](#) in Iraq and, until the U.S. withdrawal, Afghanistan, is capable of shooting down mini and tactical UAS. It fires 20 mm rounds, often hundreds at a time, to strike incoming projectiles with typically a fifty to sixty percent [effectiveness rate](#).
    - Operating C-RAM in dense urban environments is a challenge since attempting to target a projectile could cause significant unintended damage.
  - » The U.S. Army has selected the Coyote Anti Drone UAS, which is a tube-launched expendable system, as one of its interim C-UAS solutions.
    - While the U.S. Army has used the drone for C-UAS, it was developed as a loitering munition similar to the suicide drones that Iranian-backed forces are using.

# What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should leverage the Abraham Accords to strengthen regional security, as outlined in JINSA’s comprehensive report, [A Stronger and Wider Peace: A U.S. Strategy for Advancing the Abraham Accords](#) by:
  - » Sending clear signals of U.S. support for the Accords through the appointment of a special U.S. envoy for normalization and convening an Arab-Israeli summit on regional security;
  - » Passing an Abraham Accords Defense Cooperation Act that directs the administration to consult with regional partners on establishing a shared air operations framework and integrated air defense architecture, authorizes an Abraham Accords Defense Technology Foundation to push research and development (R&D), and expands counter-unmanned aircraft systems (C-UAS);
  - » Developing an integrated regional air defense network that pushes multilateral cooperation among regional partners, including possibly Israel’s proven air defense systems; and
  - » Directing U.S. leadership efforts and small amounts of seed money toward stimulating regional defense R&D cooperation for new military technologies and capabilities.
- The Biden administration should place the Houthis back on the list of FTOs and reimpose sanctions.

