

Iran's Unprecedented Wave of Attacks Against the UAE

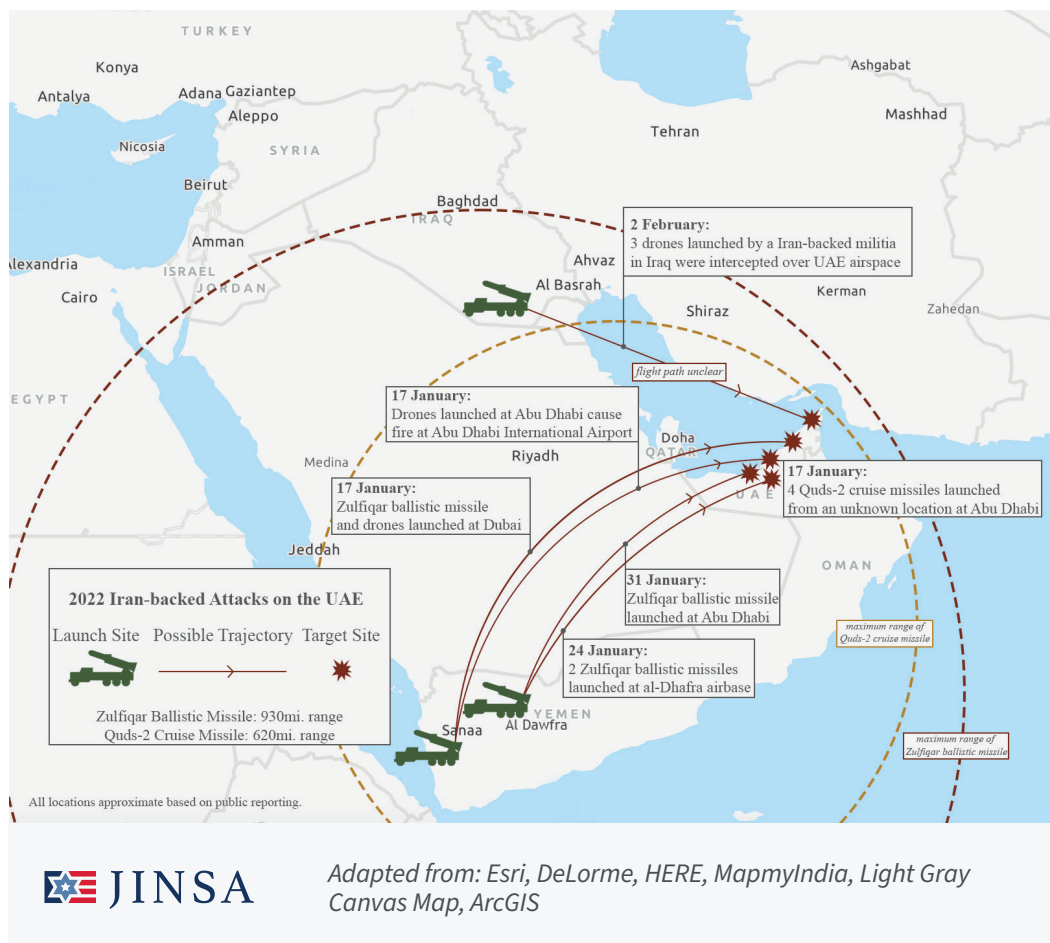
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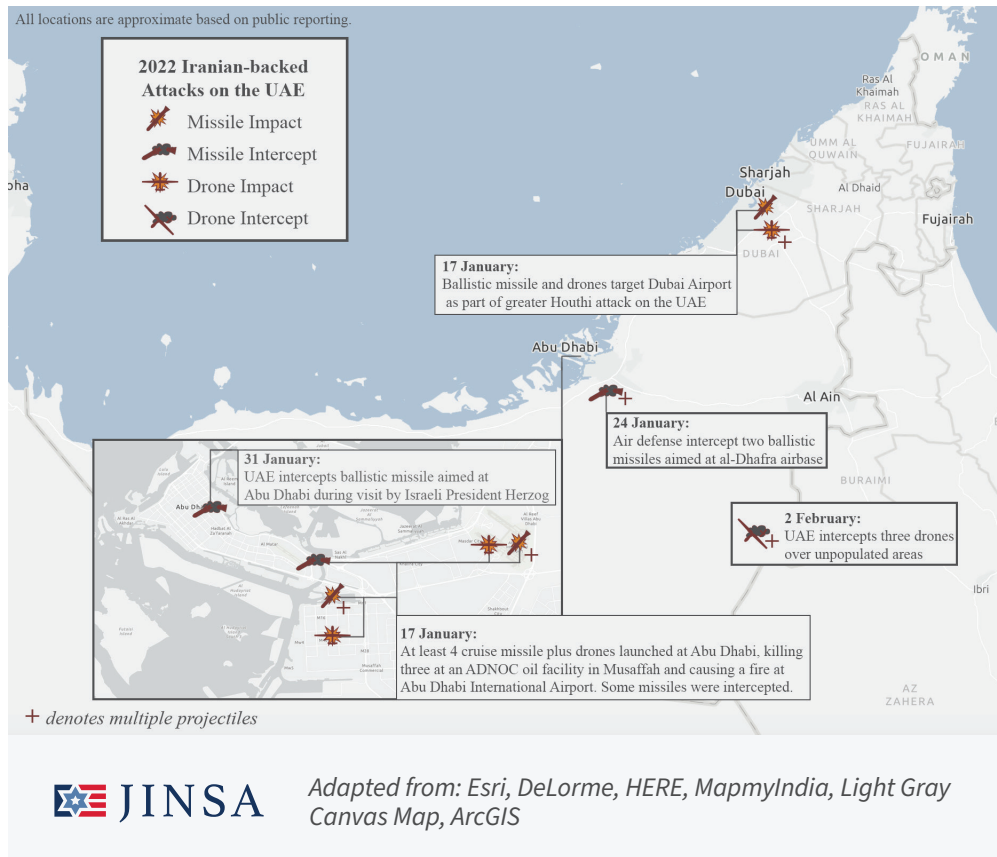
Iranian-backed militias have expanded their regional aggression by launching an unprecedented wave of attacks against the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2022. The Houthis in Yemen and, most recently, a pro-Iran militia in Iraq have targeted the UAE this year with at least four ballistic missiles, six drones, and four cruise missiles, the first time these groups are known to have targeted the previously safe Emirates. While the combined efforts of Emirati and U.S.-operated air defenses intercepted multiple projectiles, several reached their targets, causing destruction and casualties. These strikes are part of a significant escalation of attacks by Iranian-backed groups since the beginning of 2021 that has continued this year. The Biden administration urgently needs to take steps to improve regional air defenses, including leveraging the Abraham Accords to support the transfer of proven Israeli systems to Arab states and to build an integrated layered air defense architecture, as outlined in JINSA's report, [A Stronger and Wider Peace](#).

What Happened?

- On January 17, the Iranian-backed Houthis [targeted the UAE](#) with five ballistic and cruise missiles and three drones in attacks that caused [three civilian deaths](#).
 - » American-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) that the Emirates [purchased in 2011](#) intercepted at least two of the missiles, the system's [first recorded operational use](#), while several projectiles got through.
 - » The strikes were apparently retaliation after a UAE-backed Yemeni militia, the Giants Brigade, [took back](#) the oil-rich province of Shabwa, cutting off Houthi supply lines.
- The Houthis launched at least [two ballistic missiles](#) on January 24 that targeted a base in Abu Dhabi where 2,000 American troops are stationed. The combined efforts of U.S.-operated Patriot air defense batteries and UAE air defenses intercepted the missiles.
- On January 31, during the first-ever visit by an Israeli president, the Houthis [attacked the UAE](#) with ballistic missiles, which Emirate air defenses intercepted. U.S.-operated Patriot missiles also [activated](#). Israeli President Isaac Herzog's trip to the UAE symbolized the countries increasingly close relations since signing the Abraham Accords.

- On February 1, the Pentagon [announced](#) that it is sending the USS Cole guided-missile destroyer and a squadron of advanced F-22 fighters to the UAE to help deter and defend against further attacks.
- A pro-Iran militia in Iraq [claimed](#) to launch [three drones](#) at the UAE on February 2, which were intercepted by UAE air defenses over unoccupied territory.
- Current head of CENTCOM General Frank McKenzie [visited the UAE](#) on February 6 to provide “assurance.” McKenzie noted in an interview on February 7 that “the equipment [the Houthis] are firing is certainly Iranian.... If Iran didn’t approve this specific attack, they’re certainly morally responsible for it.”
 - » McKenzie said in the [interview](#) that “we are working with our partners here in the region and with the industry back in the United States to develop solutions that would work against drones.... We would like to work against drones what we call ‘Left of Launch,’ [meaning] before they can be launched.... And if you can’t do that, you will certainly be able to shoot them down as they reach their intended target.”

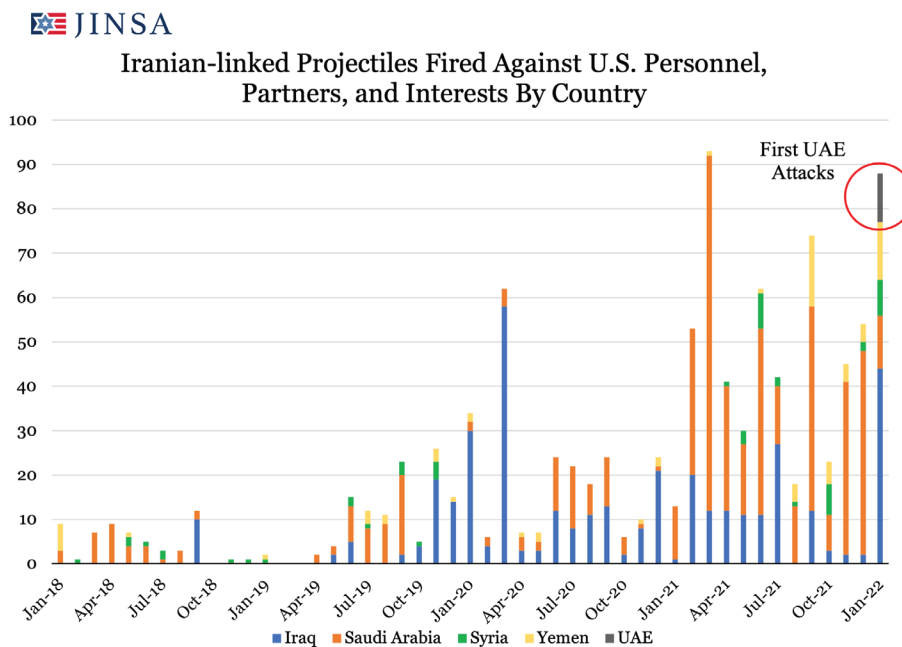
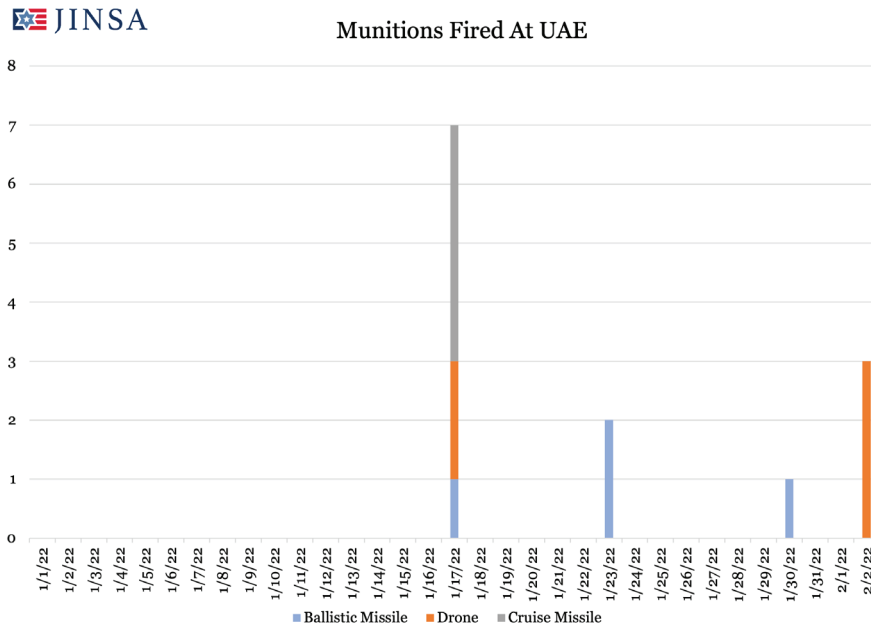




Why Is It Important?

- Drone attacks by Iranian-backed groups currently pose the greatest immediate threat to U.S. service members, partners, and interests in the Middle East. The recent attacks, however, mark the first time that the UAE is known to have been targeted, marking a significant and dangerous expansion of Iran’s regional aggression. The frequency of these strikes has increased significantly since January 2021 and are likely to continue without significant action led by the United States, together with its regional partners, to deter them and/or protect against them with a layered regional air defense network.
- A reported 65,000 U.S. citizens live in the UAE, including several thousand U.S. troops at bases like Al Dhafra that have been targeted.
- The UAE is one of the world’s leading hubs of trade, finance, and tourism. The systematic targeting of its commercial center by Iranian-supplied ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones is a major development and threat. The Houthis have on multiple occasions said their goal is to bring down the world’s tallest building in Dubai, the Burj Khalifa. Should they succeed, it could kill thousands on a scale of the 9/11 attacks in New York City.
- Some of the ballistic missiles being fired at the UAE are capable of striking targets throughout the region, including southern Israel.

- » According to [JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker](#), drones account for sixty-two percent of the projectiles that Iranian partners launched in attacks against targets in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the UAE during 2021 and 2022, compared to just nineteen percent between 2018-2020.
- The Houthis have fired over 400 projectiles, including over 320 drones, at Saudi Arabia in 2021 and 2022.
- Meanwhile, aggression against the UAE was relatively rare before 2022. The Houthis have previously claimed to target the UAE, but the [Emirates have denied](#) those assertions.



- With negotiations to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) potentially [reaching their conclusion](#) in the next few weeks, Iranian partner militias in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria have increased their targeting of U.S. service members and partners to increase Tehran’s leverage at the negotiating table in Vienna and drive American forces out of the region.
 - » Iran’s use of proxy attacks during nuclear negotiations contrasts with the U.S. approach during nuclear negotiations. Not only has the United States largely avoided military responses to attacks on its service members and partners but also the Biden administration has lifted sanctions against its proxies, stopped enforcing others, and recently preemptively issued waivers on Iran’s civilian nuclear program.
 - In February 2021, the Biden administration [removed the Houthis](#) from the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) sanctions list (while keeping some individual leaders on the list) in an effort to deescalate the conflict and rebalance relations with Saudi Arabia.
- At a [JINSA webinar](#) on January 19, UAE Ambassador to the United States Yousef Al Otaiba stated that the Emirates would request that the United States place the Houthis back on the FTO list, an action that President Biden [claimed he is considering](#) later that day.
- The United States has developed several C-UAS options but has not deployed them in sufficient quantities, no single system can track and intercept the full range of drone threats, and America’s partners lack an integrated and layered C-UAS architecture to address threats coming from origins throughout the region.
- At his [confirmation hearing](#) to lead U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) on February 8, Lt. Gen. Michael Kurilla argued that building a regional integrated air and missile defense is “probably the area with some of the greatest opportunity.... I think the addition of Israel...will help with that.... We are collectively stronger together, and there are areas where each one brings unique capabilities.”
 - » Kurilla also argued that there “is a risk with sanctions relief that Iran would use some of that money to support its proxies and terrorism in the region and if they did, it could increase risk to our forces in the region.”
- Reports indicate that Israel is in conversations to [deliver air defense systems](#) to several Gulf states.
 - » Iron Dome is a very short-range air defense (V-SHORAD) system that has proven incredibly successful intercepting rockets fired from Gaza at Israeli population centers, including intercepting drones for the first time in May 2021.
 - According to Israel’s Channel 13 news, Israeli officials are [moving toward selling](#) the Iron Dome to the UAE, while another report from Israel’s Channel 12 has said that Israeli officials have not decided on whether to sell the system to the UAE or Saudi Arabia.
 - » Rafael’s Drone Dome has an electro-optical and infrared sensor and radar to detect, track and destroy drones flying up to 10 km away.
 - » Rafael’s Advanced Defense System’s SPYDER mobile defense system can engage multiple targets at once using Python-5 and I-Derby missiles for short- to long-range defense against aircraft, cruise missiles, drones, and standoff weapons.

- » The Israel Aerospace Industries Barak 8 medium-range surface-to-air missile system has land and maritime variants that can protect against aircraft, drones, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and other aerial threats.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Biden administration should redesignate the Houthis as an FTO, since the group has continued targeting civilian facilities after being delisted.
- In cooperation with the UAE, the United Kingdom, France, and other countries, the United States should introduce a UN Security Council resolution condemning Iran's violation of the arms embargo originally imposed on the Houthis in 2015 by UN Security Council Resolution 2216. In January 2022, the UN Panel of Experts released its latest [report](#) indicating that thousands of lethal weapons recently interdicted by the U.S. Navy likely came from ports in Iran.
- The United States should provide the UAE additional air defense capabilities, particularly to detect, track, and intercept small low-flying drones, using systems that U.S. forces in Iraq are already successfully operating.
- The U.S. State Department should support discussions to bring Israel's proven air defense capabilities to Arab Gulf states and help resolve sensitive questions surrounding the protection of cutting-edge technology and intellectual property. President Biden should appoint a Special U.S. Envoy for Normalization with an expert team capable of facilitating and accelerating conversations between signatories to the Abraham Accords on issues of defense cooperation.
- In the long-term, the United States should leverage the Abraham Accords between Arab states and Israel to develop shared air operations and an integrated regional air defense, as outlined in a [JINSA report](#) by U.S. national security experts.