

U.S. Tensions with Saudi Arabia and UAE

Tuesday's report that leaders of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) declined to speak with President Biden about increasing their oil output reflects a clear perception by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that their vital security concerns are being ignored by Washington, as it negotiates a dangerous new nuclear deal with Iran and failed to provide proper assistance during a sustained escalation in attacks by Iran and its proxies. Despite these differences, the United States and the two Gulf countries still stand to gain more from cooperation than from cold shoulders.

The United States should first reassure its partners by rejecting a bad nuclear deal with Iran, redesignating the Houthis as a terrorist organization, promoting collective maritime and air defenses, and addressing bilateral tensions with Saudi Arabia.

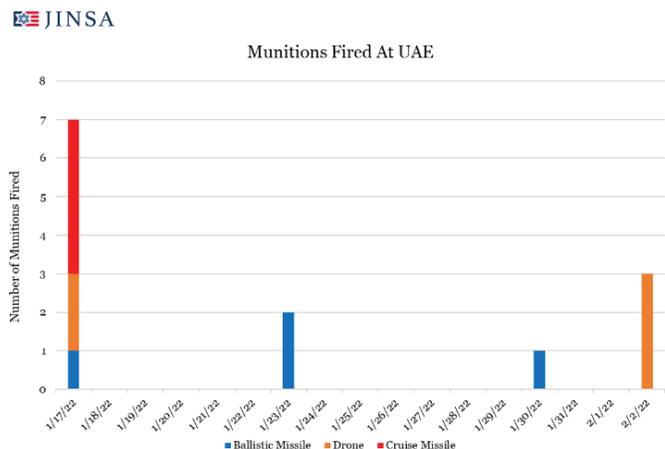
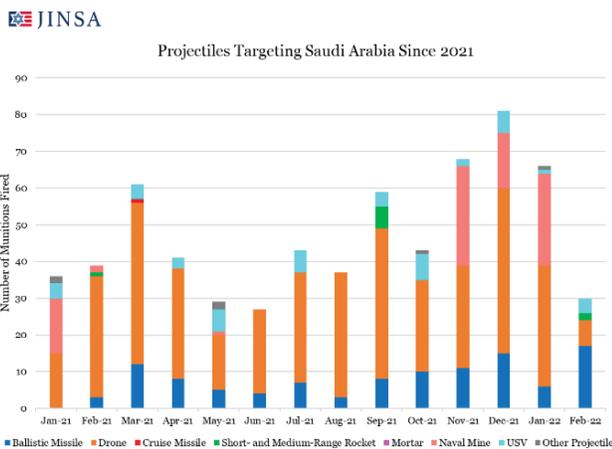
What Happened?

- On Tuesday March 8, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#) that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and the UAE's de facto leader Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ) both turned down requests to speak with President Biden.
 - » The White House sought the calls to encourage greater oil output from the two Gulf countries, whose spare production capacity makes them uniquely suited to help tamp down global energy prices spikes caused by Russia's war in Ukraine.
- MBZ also [refused](#) to meet with U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander Gen. Frank McKenzie, after the latter was unable to visit the UAE until several weeks after a missile and drone attack on Abu Dhabi by Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen.
- After refusing offers to speak with President Biden and Gen. McKenzie, both MBS and MBZ [took calls](#) with the Russian and Ukrainian presidents last week.
- In a more hopeful sign, on March 9, the Emirati Ambassador to the United States said the UAE would [encourage](#) OPEC to consider increasing production.

Why Is It Important?

- The declined calls – the result of a sense of being snubbed by the Biden administration – reflect deeper political and strategic rifts that have been festering between Washington and two of its key Middle East allies since the Biden administration’s earliest days. The tensions undermine the possibility of a joint response to major current geopolitical challenges:
 - » Russia’s war in Ukraine and the impact it is having on global energy prices; and
 - » Iran’s nuclear program and regional aggression, including its pervasive drone, missile, and other projectile attacks.
- Despite their concerns about each other’s recent behavior, the United States on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the other, still have more to gain through cooperation in this critical moment than in indulging their resentment.
 - » The United States is able to offer Saudi Arabia and the UAE greater protection from the ongoing Iranian threat than any other power.
 - » To weather climbing energy prices, while keeping pressure on Russia for its illegal invasion of Ukraine by blocking its energy exports, the United States – in addition to ramping up its domestic energy production – will need the help of oil producing countries.
 - The United States would be far better served by securing the cooperation of partners like Saudi Arabia and UAE, rather than building dependencies with adversaries like Venezuela and Iran.
 - » It is unlikely, however, that the current disfunction can be satisfactorily overcome without the United States acting first to reassure its Gulf partners.
- Most recently, the two Gulf countries have been alienated by their perceived lack of U.S. response to the escalation, since the beginning of 2021, of the Houthis’ years-long offensive against Saudi Arabia and their recent dramatic missile and drone [attacks](#) against key sites in the UAE.
 - » According to JINSA’s [Iran Projectile Tracker](#), since January 2021 the Houthis have launched approximately 650 projectiles at Saudi Arabia, mostly drones and missiles.
 - » In September 2021 the United States [withdrew](#) Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Patriot air defense batteries from Saudi Arabia, despite an uptick in attacks; the Pentagon’s previous withdrawal of Patriot batteries from the kingdom in May 2020 led to a spike in Houthi attacks.
 - » Beginning on January 17, 2022, the Houthis launched four major [projectile attacks](#) on critical infrastructure in UAE, several of which caused death and destruction.
 - In the wake of the January 17 attack, and [despite](#) a January 19 call with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, MBZ declined to meet with Gen. McKenzie during the latter’s February 7 visit to UAE.

- The Emiratis have told visitors that MBZ sought a call with President Biden in the immediate aftermath of the first Houthi attack, and was deeply hurt and angered when no direct communication was forthcoming.
- The UAE and Saudis have also been infuriated by the administration’s refusal to act on one of their most important requests: re-designating the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) for the group’s sustained attacks on their civilian populations.
- » After failing to get the Biden administration to grant increased access to U.S. intelligence on threats from Yemen, and to redesignate the Houthis – and despite the United States condemning the attacks and sending aerial and naval reinforcements to UAE – the Emirates [abstained](#) from a February 26 U.S.-led UN Security Council resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.
- It is also possible that the UAE abstention on the Ukraine resolution was linked to a UN Security Council vote two days later, on February 28, to [expand the UN arms embargo on the Houthis](#). Russia voted in favor of the resolution, suggesting some sort of agreement with the UAE.
- » Saudi Arabia and the UAE expressed similar alarm after the Trump administration’s failure to respond to Iran’s massive September 2019 drone and missile attack against Saudi Arabia’s Abqaiq and Khurais energy facilities, which are among the world’s biggest.



- More generally, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are frustrated by the Biden administration’s abrupt Afghanistan withdrawal, for which U.S. partners were given little notice, and by the White House’s counterproductive efforts over the past year-plus to [conciliate](#) Tehran at their expense, including by:
 - » Removing, in February 2021, the U.S. [terrorism](#) designation and accompanying sanctions against Iran’s Houthi proxies in Yemen; and
 - » Ending, that same month, U.S. [support](#) for the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen, including arms sales to the kingdom.

- By contrast, on January 31 the President had warm words when he [designated](#) Qatar as a “Major Non-NATO Ally” – as [he said](#), “to reflect the importance of our relationship, which has been central to many of our most vital interests.”
 - » Qatar, which maintains close ties with Iran, Turkey, and the Muslim Brotherhood, now joins Kuwait and Bahrain as the only Gulf countries that can access certain advanced U.S. military training and technology.
- In parallel, the White House has conspicuously sought to downgrade bilateral political ties with Saudi Arabia in response to the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, including:
 - » Then-presidential candidate Biden’s 2019 description of the Saudi government as a “pariah [with] very little redeeming social value” – a statement which the White House spokesperson [reiterated](#) just this week;
 - » Emphasizing from the start that Biden would [not interact](#) directly with MBS; and
 - » Making public in February 2021 a U.S. intelligence report detailing how MBS [approved](#) the Khashoggi killing.
- Saudi Arabia and the UAE also are [worried](#) by U.S. efforts to [rejoin](#) the JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran, which would leave Tehran dangerously close to a nuclear weapon while also providing it with a sanctions relief windfall to continue ramping up regional aggression.
 - » Perhaps most acutely, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are concerned that, as part of a negotiated JCPOA reentry, the Biden administration [will lift](#) the U.S. terrorism designation against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – which spearheads Iran’s proxy attacks out of Yemen and elsewhere around the region – as part of broader terrorism sanctions relief for Iran well above and beyond what is required by the JCPOA.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The United States should take immediate steps to reassure Saudi Arabia and the UAE of its commitment to their security and repair relations in order to enable cooperation.
- Most immediately, the White House could begin by taking into account Gulf concerns in the ongoing nuclear negotiations with Iran. Ideally, this would mean walking away from the negotiations altogether – as U.S. officials [have claimed](#) they are ready to do. Short of that, the Biden administration should publicly commit itself not to lift the IRGC’s terrorist designation.
 - » The Biden administration also should not lift similar terrorism designations on other key pillars of the Iranian regime, not just as a matter of national security but also because this is not required for the United States to resume JCPOA compliance.

- The Houthi attacks on the UAE in early 2022, and the U.S. decision to rush defenses to the Emirates in response, underscores the growing urgency for more concerted U.S. leadership that can enable its Middle East partners to build collective defenses against Iranian threats.
 - » As a first and urgent step, the Biden administration should reverse course on the Houthis and re-designate them as an FTO.
 - » As JINSA's Abraham Accords Policy Project [spelled out](#) in January, CENTCOM is a natural locus for more integrated regional security cooperation – including with Israel – in the maritime and air defense spheres, especially in light of the currently stove-piped and largely ineffective capabilities of America's Arab partners in these areas.
 - Developing a common air operating picture and a regional early warning system among CENTCOM and partner nations could be a practicable set of first steps.
 - » Given increasingly acute, competing demands in Europe and Indo-Pacific, more coherent regional cooperation under U.S. auspices could help reduce existing burdens on the United States as the Middle East's primary security provider.
- The White House also should address bilateral tensions with Saudi Arabia while creating a firewall between strengthening defense cooperation and addressing lingering concerns about the Khashoggi killing. Steps in this direction should include:
 - » Appointing an American ambassador to Riyadh, the absence of which has reinforced the general impression of U.S. retrenchment and indifference to the region generally;
 - » Treating MBS as Saudi Arabia's de facto leader and appropriate interlocutor for Biden, and removing any doubt that the administration accepts MBS as the kingdom's likely heir apparent.
 - » Pursuing a [strategy](#) to promote Saudi-Israeli normalization, beginning with closer cooperation on air defenses against shared Iran-backed threats.