

Houthi Attacks Show Need for Stronger U.S.-Saudi Defense Cooperation

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As part of their steadily escalating aggression against Saudi Arabia, over the weekend Iran's Houthi proxies in Yemen launched one of their most impactful missile and drone attack in months against vital energy, water, and power facilities in the kingdom. While reports indicate the Biden administration recently rushed additional air defenses to protect Saudi Arabia, critical targets across the country remain vulnerable to Houthi attacks, and U.S.-Saudi relations remain strained to the detriment of both countries and regional security. The Biden administration should prioritize strengthening America's diplomatic coordination and dialogue with its Arab Gulf partners and bolster security cooperation against shared Iran-backed threats, especially in the air defense realm.

What Happened?

- On March 19 and 20, the Iran-backed Houthis fired at least three missiles and twelve drones at [Saudi energy, electricity and water desalination facilities](#), with five of the projectiles reportedly striking their targets.
 - » Saudi Arabia said it [intercepted a ballistic missile and nine drones](#).
 - » Riyadh stated the attacks [would affect](#) “the kingdom’s production capacity and its ability to fulfill its commitments, which no doubt will threaten the safety and stability of energy supply to the global markets.”
- Less than a month before the attacks, the Biden administration “transferred a significant number of Patriot antimissile interceptors to Saudi Arabia,” according to a senior administration official who spoke [with The Wall Street Journal](#).
 - » U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan [condemned the attack](#) and blamed the Houthis for the continuing violence in Yemen, saying, “The Houthis launch these terrorist attacks with enabling by Iran, which supplies them with missile and UAV components, training, and expertise.”

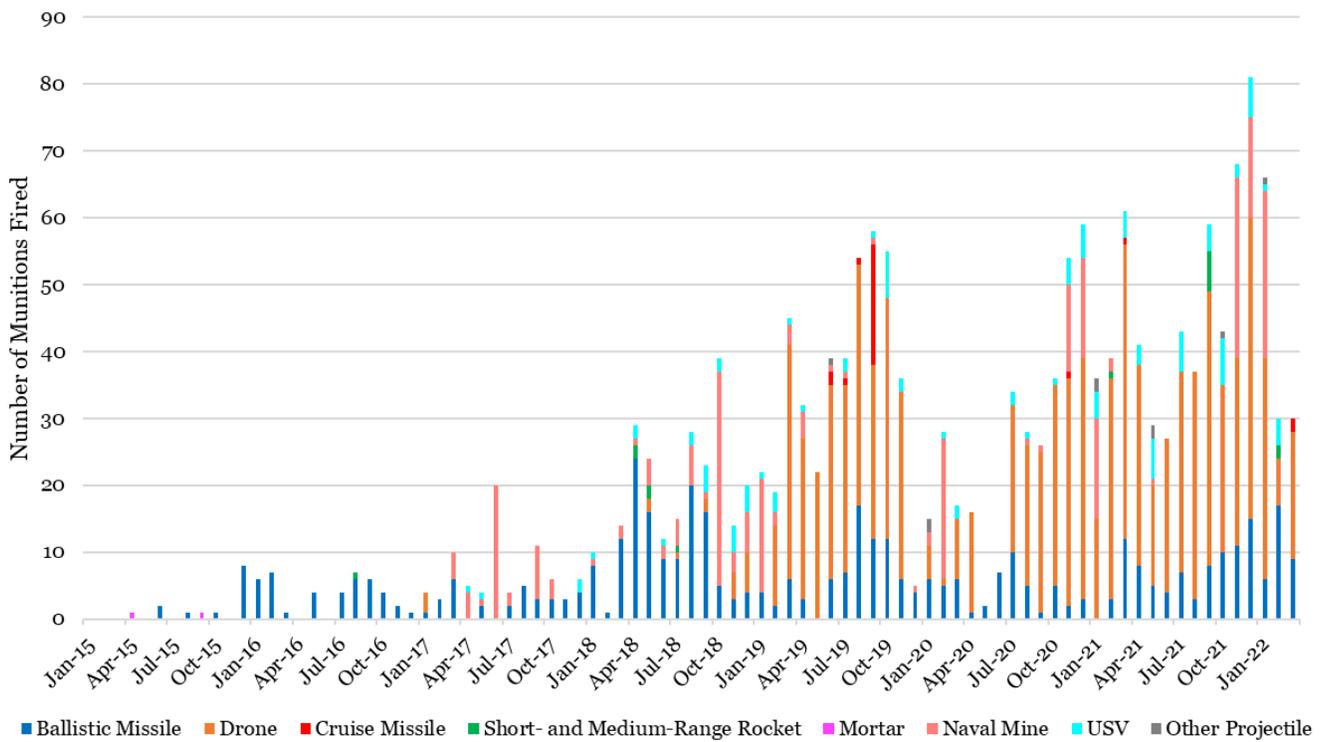
Why Is It Important?

- Despite the recent Patriot deployment, [deteriorating](#) U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) since President Biden took office have undermined coordinated policy action against Iran and toward the war in Ukraine.
 - » The Biden administration entered office seeking to recalibrate relations with Saudi Crown Prince and de facto leader Mohammad bin Salman (MBS)—who was implicated in the 2018 [murder of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi](#). The administration ended U.S. support for the Saudi-led coalition’s war in Yemen and delisted the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).
 - In 2019, then-presidential candidate Biden described the Saudi government as a “pariah [with] very little redeeming social value,” a sentiment that White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [reiterated](#) earlier this month.
 - » The Gulf states also were alarmed by the [abrupt U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan](#), and felt the United States did not respond strongly or rapidly enough to the Iranian-backed attacks against them, particularly after a wave of [provocative](#) Houthi missile and drone strikes against UAE critical infrastructure beginning in late January.
 - U.S. officials who spoke [with The Wall Street Journal](#) claimed the Patriots were transferred from elsewhere in the Middle East and that the transfer took time because of other partners requesting the systems and normal vetting processes, not because the administration intentionally delayed the process.
 - » Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are [highly concerned](#) that the Biden administration’s pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran will not forestall Tehran’s path to a nuclear weapon, while providing it with extensive sanctions relief that it can use to further destabilize the region.
 - This includes reports that the administration is considering removing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the FTO list and possibly other terrorism designations. The IRGC funds, trains, and coordinates Iran’s militia partners like the Houthis who regularly attack U.S. service members, partners, and interests throughout the Middle East.
- In the wake of these strains—and especially since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine late last month—President Biden has tried, largely unsuccessfully thus far, to work with the Saudis and Emiratis to mitigate some of the conflict’s key geopolitical consequences:
 - » The UAE abstained from two votes in the United Nations Security Council on February 25 and 27 condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which was [reportedly tied to their displeasure](#) with the U.S. response to the Houthi attacks against them. The abstentions may also have been connected to Russia supporting [another UNSC resolution](#) on February 28 that enlarged an embargo on the Houthis.
 - » On March 8, [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported that MBS and the UAE’s de facto leader, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), had both recently declined to speak with President Biden, who wanted to discuss increasing oil production to help offset the decrease in supplies and high prices stemming from sanctions against Russia. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [denied](#) there were any “rebuffed calls.”

- While neither the Saudis nor the UAE have acceded to President Biden’s pleadings to increase production, the UAE Ambassador to the United States Yousef Al Otaiba said on March 9 that [the UAE supports](#) “production increases and will be encouraging OPEC to consider higher production levels.”
- The recent Patriot deployment, while welcome, cannot by itself address the magnitude and pace of Iran’s growing—and increasingly capable—missile and drone offensives against Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other U.S. regional allies.
 - » Together, the Houthis’ assault on March 19 and 20 was one of their largest attacks in their steadily-escalating, years-long projectile campaign against Saudi Arabia, and demonstrates their increasing ability to launch coordinated and widespread assaults to overcome existing air defenses.
- According to [JINSA’s Projectile Tracker](#), the Houthis have fired over 680 projectiles at Saudi Arabia since the start of 2021, including over 420 drones.



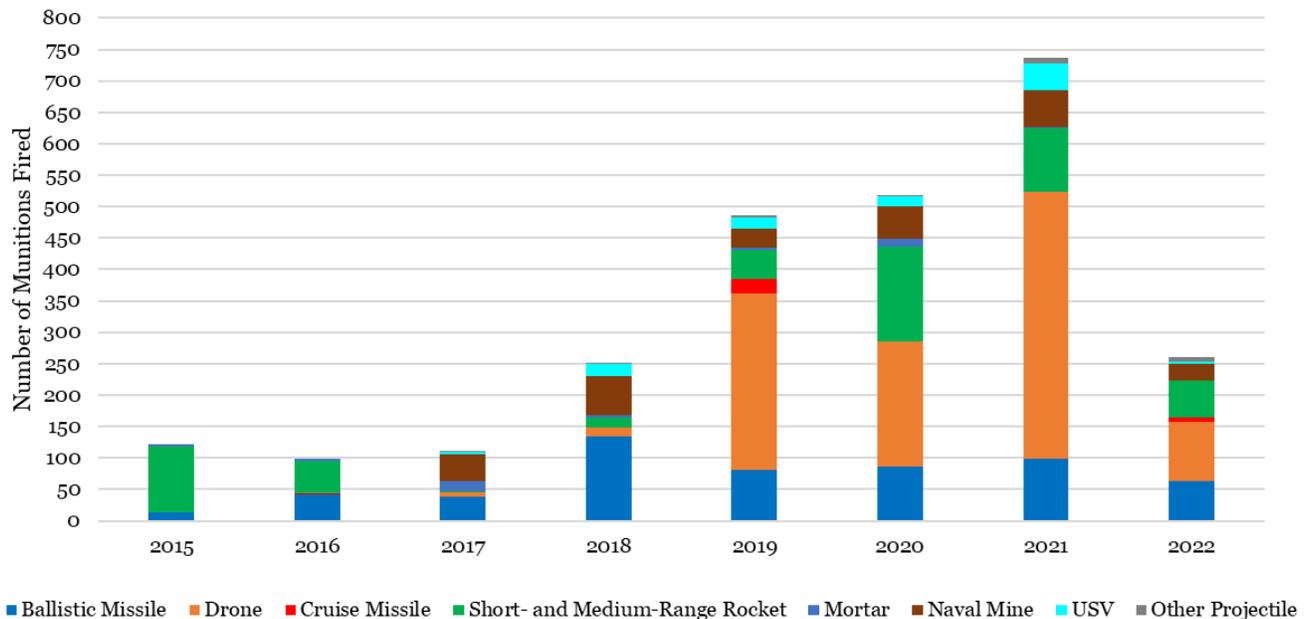
Iranian-backed Munitions Launched At Saudi Arabia Since 2015



» During a similar timeframe during the Trump administration, from January 2019 to March 2020, the Houthis fired roughly 200 fewer projectiles.



Iranian-linked Munitions Launched Per Year Against U.S. Personnel and Interests in the Middle East 2015-Present



- » The Saudis and Emiratis currently rely on conventional air defenses that are expensive, not well-suited to intercepting drones, and in heavy demand by other countries.
 - The [Pentagon withdrew](#) Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Patriot air defense batteries from Saudi Arabia in September 2021, despite an increase in Houthi attacks. A previous withdrawal of Patriot batteries from Saudi Arabia in May 2020 led to a surge in Houthi strikes.
 - The Saudis also neutralize many of the Houthis’ incoming projectile attacks with air-to-air missiles. In November 2021, the Biden administration [approved a \\$650 million sale](#) that included 280 AIM-120C-7/C-8 Advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) and 596 LAU-128 Missile Rail Launchers (MRL), as well as additional materials and technical support.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- President Biden can immediately improve ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE by finally appointing high-powered ambassadors to both countries, preferably ones with close personal ties to Biden himself. The failure even to nominate candidates after 14 months in office has underscored a lack of U.S. prioritization of those countries' shared interests with the United States.
- U.S. officials should negotiate with regional partners to achieve an increase in oil production and strengthened commitments of U.S. support for regional security.
 - » The U.S. State Department should redesignate the Houthis as an FTO, given that their missile and drone strikes on civilian targets clearly constitute terrorism. Rather than making the Houthis more willing to negotiate a peaceful solution to the Yemen conflict, their removal from the list in February 2021 only increased their intransigence and encouraged a significant escalation in Houthi attacks inside Yemen as well as against the Saudis and UAE.
 - » Without sacrificing its concerns about the Khashoggi murder, the Yemen conflict, or other areas of concern, the Biden administration needs to establish an ongoing and productive line of communication to the crown prince regarding mutual U.S.-Saudi interests.
- The United States should lead an effort with its key Gulf partners and Israel to establish a regional integrated air defense network, as [JINSA's Abraham Accords Policy Project](#) spelled out in January.
 - » Specifically, as practicable first steps, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) should begin by working with partners to establish a common air threat picture and shared early-warning systems.
 - » The United States should also help facilitate the sharing of intelligence and operational experience between its Gulf partners and Israel, as well as the acquisition of Israeli air defenses by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which have a proven track record of intercepting Iranian projectiles.
- The Biden administration should consider the concerns of Arab Gulf states about U.S. nuclear negotiations with Iran. Ideally, this would include [walking away from negotiations](#), considering Iran and its partners have conducted unprecedented attacks against U.S. service members, partners and vital energy interests even as the talks in Vienna entered their final phase. This includes the series of strikes on the UAE in January and February, as well as the [direct Iranian ballistic missile strike](#) near the U.S. consulate in Erbil, Iraq, on March 13.
 - » As a minimal show of support for its regional partners' security concerns, the Biden administration should commit to not remove the IRGC from the FTO list or lift any terrorism and human rights designations as part of any new nuclear deal with Iran.
- Congress should hold open hearings with U.S. officials that seek to address how CENTCOM plans to counter Iran's attacks, which are likely to increase whether there is a new nuclear agreement or negotiations end without a deal.
- Congress should also hold hearings to examine the deteriorating state of U.S. relations with its most important Middle East partners.