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Houthi UAV Strike Against Tel Aviv Escalates Iran-backed Regional War

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The Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen [launched](#) *an Iranian Samad-3 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) on July 19 that killed one person and injured ten other individuals in Tel Aviv, Israel. The strike underscored that the war started by Hamas's October 7 attack is not limited to Gaza but a multi-front conflict involving Iran's full range of proxies. It also demonstrated, however, not only that the United States has failed to deter Houthi attacks but, to the contrary, that the Yemen-based terror group is growing bolder and more capable despite U.S. efforts to stop it. The Iranian-made UAV that struck Israel had been modified to extend its range by over 70 percent and launched on a trajectory designed to evade Israeli air defenses.*

Following the attack, Israel conducted its [first-ever strikes](#) *against the Houthis in Yemen on July 20, showing a willingness to hold the Houthis' accountable that has so far mostly been lacking from U.S. efforts. In contrast to the U.S. strikes, which have primarily targeted Houthi launchers and weapons storage facilities, Israel's strikes against cranes and oil supplies at the Hodeidah port degraded Iran's ability to fund and arm its proxy in Yemen. The United States should coordinate with Israel and other partners to launch more frequent, deadly, and destructive strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen and Iranian ships, facilities, and leaders involved in weapons proliferation, enforce a quarantine to inspect ships traveling to Yemen, and enhance regional air defense protection.*

What Happened?

- On July 19, the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen [launched](#) an Iranian Samad-3 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that exploded in Tel Aviv, Israel, killing one person and injuring 10 other individuals. The UAV struck yards away from the U.S. consulate building.

- On July 20, Israeli F-15s, F-35s, and other fighter jets [launched](#) roughly 10 strikes against the Houthi-controlled port city of Hodeidah, Yemen, marking the first Israeli strikes against the Houthis.

- On July 21, Israel's Arrow 3 air defense system [intercepted](#) a Houthi ballistic missile outside of Israeli airspace, triggering sirens in Israel's southern port city of Eilat.

Range of Iranian Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) From Areas Controlled By Houthis in Yemen

UAV Ranges:
Qasef-1|2 *(150 km)*
Ababil-2, Mohajer-6 *(200 km)*
Samad-2 *(500 km)*
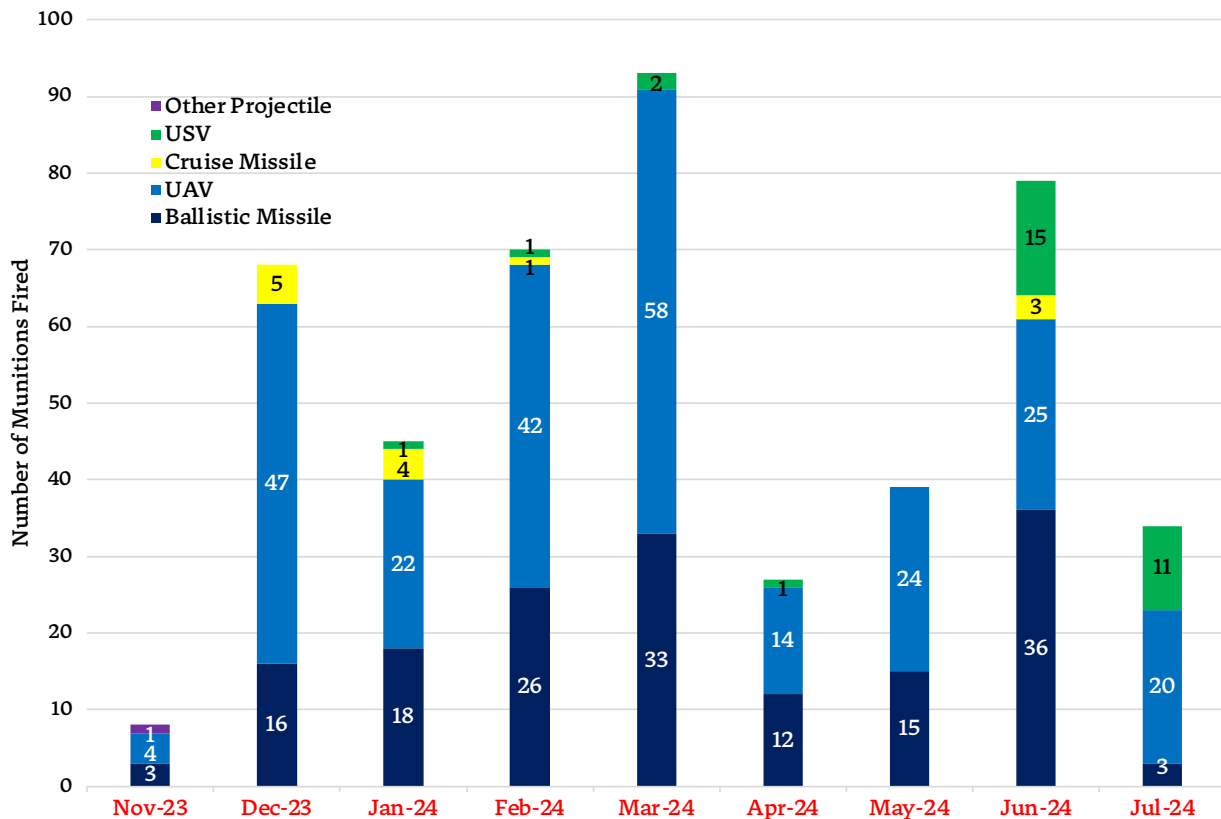Samad-3 *(1,500 km)*
Oghab-1 *(2,000 km)*

Why Is It Important?

- The Houthi UAV attack against Tel Aviv on July 19 demonstrated substantial capabilities to strike Israel by adapting Iranian UAVs and flying them along indirect routes to confuse or evade Israeli air defenses.

  » It also made clear that, despite over 420 strikes against the Houthis since January, the United States has failed to deter the group or prevent it from conducting further attacks. The Houthis' ballistic missile attack on July 21 similarly indicated that Israel's first attack in Yemen failed to deter the Iran-backed terrorist group.

  – At the same time, the Houthis may have chosen, after the Israeli strikes, not to risk the further escalation that another deadly attack would cause by responding with a ballistic missile, which Israel had demonstrated a repeated capability to intercept, instead of another UAV attack with an indirect flight path.

- While Israel is roughly 1,118 miles (1,800 kilometers) from Yemen, modifying the Samad-3 UAV so that it could fly a longer, indirect path to Israel enabled the Houthis to deceive Israeli air defense operators. The Israeli and U.S. military assets in the Red Sea will likely closely monitor this route in the aftermath of the attack.

  » The UAV traveled for roughly 16 hours at speeds of between 92-115 miles per hour (80-100 knots or 148-185 kilometers per hour) on a flight path of over 1,615 miles (2,600 kilometers).

  – An unmodified Samad-3 has an estimated range of 932 miles (1,500 kilometers).

  – The Houthis appear to have modified the Samad-3 to extend its range by over 683 miles (1,100 kilometers) or 73 percent.

- The attack also indicates the Houthis' ability, through Iranian assistance, to adapt its already deadly UAVs and develop new tactics, techniques, and procedures that improve the ability to reach and strike targets.

  » The UAV reached Israel by flying over Sudan, southern Egypt, and then approaching Israel over the Mediterranean Sea.

  » The nearly 300 UAVs that the Houthis have launched against maritime targets and Israel since November 2023 will have significantly grown the Iran-backed terrorist group's understanding of United States and partner defensive capabilities that would have aided the attack on July 19.

  – Similarly, the Iranian regime and its proxies have also likely gained substantial knowledge of Israeli air defense capabilities and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that aided the July 21 attack from the over 420 UAVs that Hezbollah has launched against Israel since the war began.

  » The IDF indicated that Israeli radar tracked the UAV but that IDF air defense operators either dismissed it as a non-threatening blip on the radar, similar to numerous false threat notifications throughout the war, or were distracted by a simultaneous attack traveling toward eastern Israel from Iraq.

  – Despite Houthi claims that modifications to the UAV made it undetectable, the IDF stated that this was not the case and that air defense warning systems finally identified the projectile as a threat when it was five minutes away.

  » After the attack, the IDF doubled the number of operators analyzing radars.

- The Houthi UAV attack against Israel coincided with an escalation of strikes that the group has conducted against maritime targets since June.
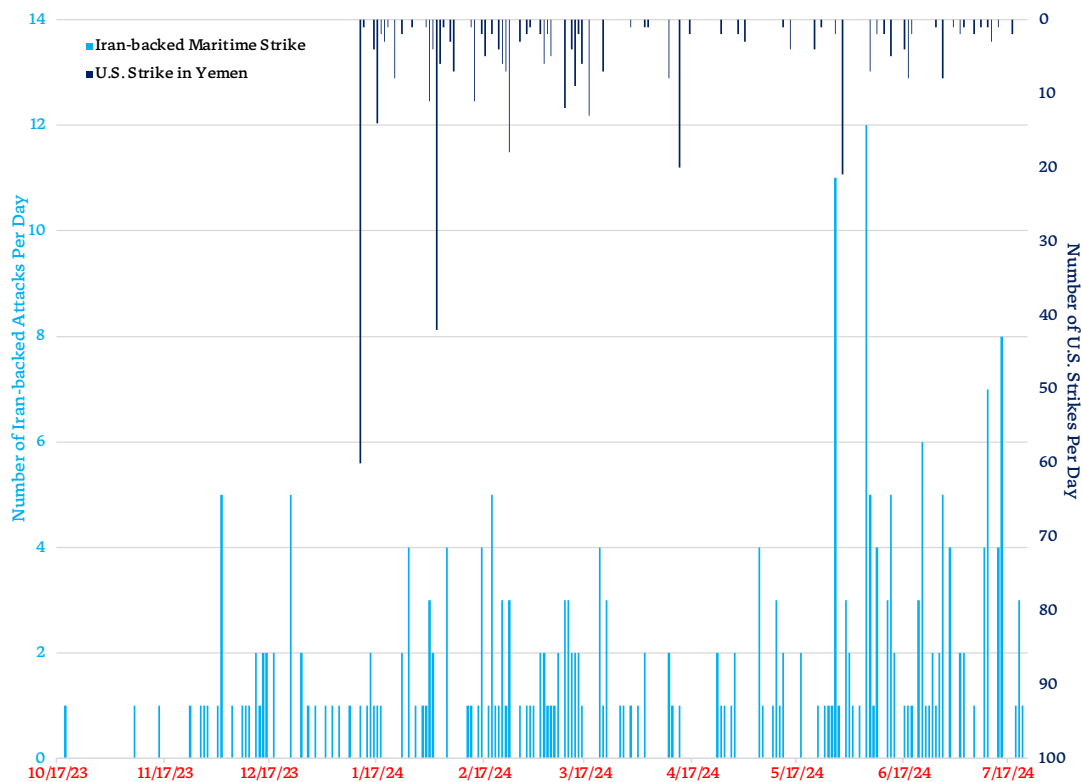
» The Houthis have launched over 260 attacks using roughly 500 projectiles at maritime targets since its escalation began in November 2023, including approximately 285 UAVs, 160 ballistic missiles, 18 cruise missiles, and 31 unmanned surface vessels (USVs).

» Israeli officials claimed that the Houthis have launched over 200 attacks against Israel since the war began, most of which U.S. and partner naval forces have intercepted. The Houthis conducted at least 20 attacks that Israeli air defenses intercepted or reached Israeli territory, according to JINSA data.

Iran-linked Projectiles in the Maritime Domain ⚑ JINSA

- U.S.-led efforts to deter the Iran-backed group in Yemen or degrade its capabilities have failed to stop the Houthis from launching offensive strikes.

» The United States has conducted over 420 strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen, primarily projectile launchers and stockpiles.

– On July 19, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Commander of U.S. Central Command General Michael E. Kurilla sent a memo to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin arguing that the current U.S. approach is "failing" to deter Houthi attacks and that instead "a whole of government approach" is necessary. According to a defense official quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* report, "many people found the tone of the memo to be a bit shocking" because he argued, "U.S. service members will die if we continue going this way."

Iran-linked Projectile Attacks in the Maritime Domain and U.S. Strikes in Yemen Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War

- In contrast to the costly attritional warfare in which the United States has engaged with the Houthis, by targeting the Hodeidah port, Israel's first military efforts against the Houthis in Yemen degraded Tehran's ability to fund and proliferate weaponry to its proxy in Yemen.

  » While recent U.S. strikes have also targeted Houthi radars and command-and-control centers, the majority of the strikes have targeted Houthi launchpads and storage facilities.

    – The Houthis have launched missiles and drones that cost only tens of thousands of dollars and are readily replaceable so long as Iran's maritime supply lines remain intact.

  » Israel struck cranes at the Hodeidah port, repeatedly hitting their engines which could hinder the transfer of oil and weapons to the Houthis. Images of the location of the Israeli strike showed the port's fuel storage facility was heavily damaged and depicted at least 33 burning oil tanks. The Iranian regime primarily funds the Houthis through hydrocarbon imports that are offloaded at the port.

- While the Houthis have tried to portray the Hodeidah port as critical to humanitarian efforts in Yemen, the group has used it to import the Iranian weapons that it has launched against ships in nearby waters and Israel.

  » A former Houthi official told *Israel Hayom* that it was a mistake to attack Israel because "it would have been possible to support the Palestinians financially, with a media campaign or with humanitarian aid like other Arab countries. On the other hand, the Houthis' pursuit of a direct confrontation with Israel is a step that endangers the civilian population in the country, which is already suffering from a humanitarian crisis."

    – The former Houthi official added, "the Houthis use tens of millions of Yemenis as human shields when they send a rocket and kill an Israeli civilian. They will cause the

ports to go bankrupt…. The conflict is between Israel and the Palestinians. We do not have a direct conflict with Israel."

» An employee at the Hodeidah port stated that "the port, with its dock, containers, and ships, is intact," which suggests that the Israeli strike may not have intended to take the port entirely unusable.

● Israeli aircraft conducted mid-air refueling as part of the operation to strike Houthi targets on July 20.

» While the IDF did not specify the number of Israeli aircraft that refueled the fighter jets during the operation, it released a video showing Israeli F-35s refueling mid-air.

» Israel has purchased 4 KC-46A aircraft but they are not scheduled to arrive until 2025 and 2026. Israel requires the aircraft refueling tankers to replace its fifty-year old Ram tankers.

What Should the United States Do Next?

● The United States should coordinate with Israel and other partners to launch more frequent, deadly, and destructive strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen so long as the Iran-backed group continues its attacks against Israel, ships, or other interests in the Middle East.

» Beyond degrading the Houthis' missile and drone arsenals that it uses to launch attacks against ships in the Red Sea, coalition efforts should focus on targeting operational leaders, radars or other sensors, and command-and-control centers that the terrorist group uses to maintain power over western Yemen.

» The United States should provide Israel with intelligence to assist Israeli strikes against targets in Yemen.

» Striking Iranian naval assets that have provided targeting intelligence to the Houthis would help degrade the terrorist group's ability to conduct attacks.

● The United States and Israel should also hold Iran responsible for its proxies' attacks by targeting key Iranian capabilities.

» This should include seizing or striking Iranian ships transporting fuel or weapons and targeting manufacturing plants to prevent Tehran from rearming its proxy, similar to the Israeli operation on July 22.

● To prevent the transfer of illicit materials to Yemen while still allowing for the transfer of humanitarian aid, the United States and partner nations should enforce a maritime quarantine to inspect ships traveling to Yemeni ports.

● To further underscore what President Joe Biden has called the "ironclad" U.S. commitment to Israel's security, he should announce during Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to the White House this week that the United States will expedite the transfer to Israel of key aircraft, specifically F-35 and F-15 multirole combat aircraft, and KC-46A aerial refueling tankers—as well as air-to-air missiles that would send a strong deterrent signal to Iran.

» Israel already agreed to purchase many of these platforms.

● The Department of Defense should explore where Israel has capabilities that could be integrated into Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect Red Sea shipping against Houthi attacks and other preexisting multinational defense organizations in the Middle East, including the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), specifically Combined Task Force (CTF) 153 for Red Sea security, and the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC).