

## Armed Conflict



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### **UAE & Yemen Alert (UPDATE): Three killed in suspected UAV attack targeting Abu Dhabi on January 17; marks significant escalation given rarity of previous successful attacks**

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#### **Please be advised:**

- On January 17, the Abu Dhabi Police confirmed that three fuel transport tankers exploded in Abu Dhabi's Industrial ICAD 3 area in Musaffah, where Abu Dhabi's state-owned energy company reportedly maintains an oil storage facility and a pipeline network.
- A small fire was also recorded at a construction site at the Abu Dhabi International Airport's extension.
- The authorities stated that the explosions were possibly caused by unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) as parts of "flying objects" were found in the two areas.
- Three foreign nationals, one Pakistani and two Indians, were killed and six individuals were wounded in the attack at Musaffah. They were reportedly employees of the state-owned energy company.
- According to a report quoting the Etihad Airways spokesperson, the attack resulted in "short disruptions for a small number of flights" at the Abu Dhabi International Airport,

with operations “having resumed normally” at the time of writing.

- The Houthis have not yet released additional details of the “qualitative military operation” they claimed to have conducted within the UAE.
- The UAE’s Foreign Ministry has reportedly stated that it “reserves the right to respond to these terrorist attacks.”

## Assessments & Forecast:

1. This development is highly significant due to the extreme rarity of successful Houthi attacks targeting the UAE in recent years. In May 2019, the Shiite group released video footage of an alleged UAV attack targeting the Abu Dhabi International Airport that took place on July 26, 2018, which was refuted by Emirati authorities. The Houthis also claimed to have targeted the Dubai International Airport on August 27, 2018 and September 30, 2018, but these attacks were not corroborated with additional evidence. Prior to this, in 2017, the UAE had denied the Houthis’ claim of launching a cruise missile against a nuclear plant in Abu Dhabi. Since 2019, no Houthi-launched attacks targeting the UAE have been recorded, which could be attributed to Abu Dhabi’s formal withdrawal of its troops from Yemen. While Abu Dhabi still actively supports various anti-Houthi groups, the removal of its troops likely decreased the Houthis’ resolve to target the Emirates to some degree in the past three years. In this context, the latest incident constitutes a sharp escalation in Houthi-perpetrated hostilities towards the UAE. It shows that the Houthis maintain both the determination and the ability to effectively target the Emirati capital.
2. The Houthis possess an extensive arsenal of weapons, including ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and UAVs. They have repeatedly used their long-range missile and UAV capabilities to target strategic sites, including long-distance targets within Saudi Arabia such as Riyadh, located approximately 850 km north of the nearest Houthi-controlled territory in Yemen. The Houthis have also conducted several attacks targeting Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province, including Dammam, which is located at least 1,200 km from the nearest Houthi-held territory. Therefore, while the direction from which the UAVs were launched remains unknown, the Houthis are known to possess the capabilities to launch such an attack from Yemen. In such a case, the UAVs likely crossed Saudi territory through the southern parts of the Eastern Province to reach Abu Dhabi. While the Royal Saudi Air Defense (RSAD) has demonstrated its aerial defense capabilities vis-a-vis the Houthis, cross-border attacks in the southwestern parts of the Kingdom are not regularly recorded. It is thus possible that the Saudi authorities have not deployed extensive air defense systems in this region, which likely enabled the Houthi-launched devices to cross Saudi territory without being detected and/or intercepted.
3. If this scenario is confirmed, it would show the remaining gaps in the Saudis’ and the Emiratis’ air defense protocols as UAVs were able to travel such a long distance across both Saudi and Emirati airspaces without being intercepted. This, along with the high casualty toll, highlights the risk that the Houthis can pose to civilians and civil infrastructure in the UAE, which is a prominent tourist destination as well as major commercial hub in the region. The temporary flight disruptions recorded at Abu Dhabi International Airport following the attack also show the impact of such attacks on the air traffic in the country, which has the potential to affect flight operations across the globe given that a high number of flights between Europe, the US, and Asia are connected via the Abu Dhabi and Dubai airports. Overall, the targeting of the state-owned oil facility as well as the airport signifies the Houthis’ intention to create a sense of insecurity within the UAE which will negatively affect its global image and its economy. The Houthis likely seek to convey the message that Abu Dhabi will pay a heavy price and make itself more vulnerable to further Houthi attacks for its support to anti-Houthi groups within Yemen.
4. This is given that the attack comes amid an ongoing anti-Houthi offensive in Yemen led by the UAE-backed Giants Brigade as part its “Operation Cyclone of the South” launched at the end of December 2021, which has been very successful over recent weeks. The Giants Brigade has managed to take control of Shabwa Governorate’s Ain, Usaylan, and Bayhan districts from the Houthis and large areas of the adjacent Marib Governorate’s Harib District within a short span of time. The Houthis also seized a UAE-flagged vessel near Hodeidah’s Ras Issa [on January 2](#), alleging

that it was transporting weapons and equipment. These developments have resulted in increasing hostile rhetoric disseminated by the Houthis and Houthi-affiliated media against the UAE. The latest attack was thus likely in retaliation for the UAE's support for the Giants Brigade and conducted with the objective of deterring the UAE from supporting such factions that have the ability to militarily defeat the Houthis.

- 5. FORECAST:** In the immediate term, the Emirati authorities will likely raise their level of alertness by bolstering their air defense protocols, particularly around sensitive infrastructure in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. This will specifically include airports, oil and gas facilities, government-linked sites, and military bases as the Houthis are known to target such sites. The UAE may also respond to the latest attack by increasing its military and financial contribution to the Saudi-led Coalition and other groups such as the Giants Brigade and Southern Transitional Council (STC)-linked factions to bolster their on-ground capacity to fight the Houthis and diminish the group's capabilities within Yemen. This will also likely manifest as increased airstrikes against Houthi targets in Sanaa over the coming hours and days. However, further Houthi-perpetrated attacks against sensitive sites in the UAE cannot be ruled out over the coming weeks, particularly if the UAE-backed Giants Brigade continue their offensive against the Houthis in Marib Governorate. This is because gaining complete control over Marib is crucial to the Houthis' current military objectives within Yemen. However, these attacks even if attempted, are unlikely to be as successful as the latest one due to the UAE's elevated threat perception of such Houthi attacks against its territory.

## Recommendations:

### UAE:

1. Travel to the UAE may continue as normal while adhering to basic security precautions and adherence to cultural norms. **Contact us at [Operations@max-security.com](mailto:Operations@max-security.com) or +44 20-3540-0434 for itinerary and contingency support plans.**
2. In the event that an explosion is heard, immediately seek cover. Remain cognizant that even if an incoming projectile is intercepted, falling debris constitutes a significant risk.

### Yemen:

1. Avoid all travel to Sanaa and Aden, while contacting us at [Operations@max-security.com](mailto:Operations@max-security.com) or +44 20-3540-0434 for itinerary and contingency support plans.
2. In the event of air strikes, it is advised to take cover in a designated shelter, or if one does not exist, in a room with as few external walls, windows and openings as possible, close all openings, sit on the floor below the window line and near an internal wall.
3. We advise against all travel to outlying areas and overland travel, due to the limited government and security presence, ongoing clashes and airstrikes, as well as the heightened threat of attacks and kidnappings.
4. For those operating in or conducting business with oil facilities, it is advised to consult with us for itinerary and contingency support plans.