



Armed Conflict

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UAE Analysis: Claim of February 2 intercepted attack targeting Abu Dhabi by Iraqi Shiite militia aims to project expansion of scope of campaign against UAE by 'axis of resistance'

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Executive Summary

- On February 2, Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq, a group believed to be an Iraqi Iran-backed Shiite faction, claimed to have launched drones against Abu Dhabi. The UAE corroborated the claim, stating that its forces downed three drones penetrating the country's airspace.
- The interception of the attack by Emirati air defense systems highlights their elevated state of vigilance and increased ability to counter the aerial threat posed by drones and missiles following a series of interception of Houthi-claimed attacks. The US's deployment of combat aircraft and a guided missile destroyer to the region will further bolster this capability.
- The claim by Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq is likely credible given the precedent of attacks from the north of Abu Dhabi, the lack of a Houthi claim for the attack, and the interest and ability of Iran-backed militias to target the Emirates. However, it is more likely that the group is posing as a front for more established members of the Iran-backed "axis of resistance".
- By attacking from territory to the north of the UAE, the Shiite alliance aims to demoralize the Emirati by creating the perception that they are being attacked from all directions. Further attacks are likely over the coming weeks, although most are likely to be intercepted by Emirati air defense capabilities.
- **Those operating at or near strategic infrastructure and/or military bases in the UAE are advised to review security protocols and ensure the provision of suitable shelters that can sustain the impact of missiles and munition-dropping and/or explosive-laden UAVs.**

Current Situation

Claim by Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq

- On February 2, Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq (True Promise Brigades), a group believed to be based in Iraq and affiliated to Iran and its backed factions, [claimed](#) it had targeted "vital installations" in Abu Dhabi with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) during the early morning hours (local time) of February 2.
- It added that attacks against the UAE will continue until Abu Dhabi ceases to interfere in other countries' affairs, particularly Yemen and Iraq.

- During the evening hours of February 2 (only after the publication of the claim of responsibility), the UAE's Ministry of Defense (MoD) [corroborated](#) the incident, stating that during the early morning hours of February 2, three hostile UAVs that penetrated Emirati airspace far from populated areas, were intercepted and destroyed.



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الوية الوعد الحق
ابناء الجزيرة العربية

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

وَأَقْرَبُ الْوَعْدِ الْحَقُّ فَإِذَا هِيَ شَاخِصَةٌ أَبْصَارُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يَا وَيْلَنَا قَدْ كُنَّا فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَذَا بَلْ كُنَّا ظَالِمِينَ .

بقوة من الله سبحانه ، وعزم المجاهدين ، قام أبناء الجزيرة العربية فجر اليوم بتوجيه ضربة إلى دويلة امارات الشر ، بواسطة أربع طائرات مُسَيَّرَة إستهدفت منشآت حيوية في أبو ظبي . وستستمر ألبية الوعد الحق بتوجيه الضربات الموجهة الى أن ترفع دويلة الإمارات يدها عن التدخل في شؤون دول المنطقة وبمقدمتها اليمن و العراق ، وسحب مرتزقتهم من مقاتلين وأمنيين وسياسيين ، وستكون الضربات القادمة أشد وقعاً وإيلاماً .

والحمد لله ناصر المستضعفين ، و مُعز المؤمنين .

الوية الوعد الحق
ابناء الجزيرة العربية
١٤٤٣ رجب

Claim of UAV attack on Abu Dhabi issued by 'al-Wiyat al-Waad al-Haq'

Houthi Statements

- The Yemen-based Houthis, who previously claimed to have conducted all recent attacks against the UAE on [January 17, 24](#), and [31](#), did not claim responsibility for the latest attack.
- On February 3, the Houthi Military Spokesperson, Yahya Saree, praised the “jihadist operation” carried out by Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq and their solidarity with the Yemeni people against the “Emirati enemy”.
- On the same day, the leader of the Houthi movement, Abdul-Malik Badruldeen al-Houthi, stated

that the US, UK, and Israel pushed the UAE to return to escalation and that Abu Dhabi is subject to these countries' orders.

US Response to Recent Attacks

- On February 1 (EST), US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III announced that he spoke with UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) regarding the recent attacks against the UAE.
- In addition to sharing intelligence and air defense collaboration, the US will deploy 5th Generation Fighter aircraft to the region and the US Navy's guided-missile destroyer USS Cole to conduct a joint patrol with the UAE Navy to bolster the UAE's capabilities.

Assessments & Forecast:

Interception of February 2 UAV attack targeting Abu Dhabi highlights Emiratis' increased ability to counter hostile drone threat

1. There was no indication that targets within Abu Dhabi were impacted in the most recent attack, which lends credence to the UAE's claim of successfully intercepting the combat drone. This points towards a heightened state of vigilance by the UAE's security establishment against this threat. This is particularly given that unlike ballistic missiles, which fly at high altitudes and are somewhat easier to intercept and destroy for advanced aerial systems, UAVs fly very low and utilize terrain features to remain undetected by radar systems, making them more difficult to intercept en route to target, even if they are detected. This threat is increased further when integrated attacks of UAVs, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles are conducted simultaneously, a known Houthi tactic, as they can overwhelm air defense systems facing hostilities on multiple vectors. In addition, the use of "swarming", namely the launching of several drones in one attempted attack, is often aimed at presenting too many options for air defense systems to effectively engage, ensuring that at least some of the projectiles reach their destination.
2. The latest interception of three drones thus indicates that the UAE has bolstered its capability to engage such devices, which is likely partially achieved by deploying fighter aircraft to monitor the country's airspace and be able to respond to emerging threats. Such activities were likely significantly bolstered following the spate of Houthi-claimed attacks since January 17. **FORECAST:** Over the coming weeks and months, the UAE will seek to further bolster its air defense capabilities, particularly in areas surrounding Abu Dhabi and Dubai. This will also be supported by the UAE's strategic allies, primarily the US, which has deployed and utilized its own air defense systems in and around Abu Dhabi over the past weeks. This capability will be bolstered further by the deployment of the USS Cole and 5th Generation aircraft to the region. However, even well-integrated, effective, and multi-layered aerial defense systems cannot entirely guarantee full protection. Thus, the increasing use of UAVs as well as to a lesser extent, ballistic and cruise missiles will continue to pose a threat to the UAE. Abu Dhabi may therefore request additional operational support from its Western allies, which will increase the militarization and Western military footprint in the region.

Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq's claim of attack credible, although group likely posing as front for more established Iran-backed militias

1. Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq's first claimed attack was in [January 2021](#), when it announced that it targeted Riyadh with UAVs. The occurrence of an intercepted attack targeting Riyadh was corroborated by reports citing the Saudi-led Coalition. In this first claim, the group also threatened

to attack the “nests of evil” in Dubai. Several days later, on January 27, 2021, the group published a graphic image depicting explosions at Dubai’s Burj Khalifa caused by drones, indicating its interest in targeting the UAE. The group has since been largely dormant. However, on January 17, 2022, following the [Houthi-claimed attack](#) against the UAE, the group reemerged and released a statement praising the Houthis, while also calling upon “youth in the Arabian Peninsula to support their brothers and maintain the momentum of the operations”.

2. The latest February 2 publication thus constitutes the group’s second claim of attack since its inception, the occurrence of which the UAE’s MoD statement corroborated. Taken together with the previous year’s attack against Saudi Arabia, the lack of a Houthi claim or accusations of Houthi culpability in the Emirati statement, this lends credence to the group’s claims about at least the occurrence of the attacks, notwithstanding its opaque identity. Given that there are very few indications to point to the group’s operational capabilities and the known propensity by Iran and its established militias to introduce new groups as fronts for more established organizations, it is more likely that the group is a front for another Iraq-based Iran-affiliated militia that has well-documented links to Tehran.
3. Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq is a group believed to be an Iraq-based Shiite militia, with purported direct ties to the prominent Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH). While it also refers to itself as the “sons of the Arabian Peninsula”, the group’s reference to Iraq in its latest claim serves as another indication that it is a surrogate group of Iran’s backed factions in Iraq. At least 16 surrogate or front militias of similar nature emerged in Iraq over the past two years, with another emerging trend being these factions’ [growing use of explosive-laden UAVs](#), the proliferation of which has been enabled by direct support from Iran. The growing indications of Iraq-based Iran-backed militias possessing upgraded long-range UAV capabilities also points to the possibility that the latest attack did not emanate from Yemen but rather from a different area to the north of the UAE. This could potentially include southern Iraqi territory, where Shiite militias have a presence, a vessel located in the Persian Gulf with direct support from Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), or least likely as this would directly expose Tehran, from Iranian territory itself.
4. The potential for attacks against the UAE or indeed Saudi Arabia to be launched from territory to the north of these countries has a precedent. This may extend to attacks claimed by the Houthis but in fact conducted by other actors, or as shown by the most recent event, without a Houthi claim. In [September 2019](#), the Houthis claimed a highly notable drone attack on Saudi state-owned oil facilities in the Eastern Province’s Buqayq and Khurais. The attacks led to large-scale fire at both facilities and significant disruptions to global oil supplies and an increase to oil prices. Following investigations by independent experts reporting to a UN Security Council committee, in addition to similar assessment by Western intelligence agencies, it was found that the attacks were more likely launched from the northwest or northeast towards Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is entirely feasible that similar attacks could occur.

Latest attack points to effort to broaden geographical source of attacks by Iran’s ‘axis of resistance’, increase threat level associated with UAE

1. The development points to an attempt by some members of Iran’s “axis of resistance” to bolster the campaign against the UAE and broaden its geographical scope. It cannot be ruled out that this is based on a directive from Tehran itself given the increasing levels of coordination between the members of Iran’s proxy alliance. This is likely intended to project that the “axis of resistance” operates as a united front against the UAE. It also serves other goals such as to demoralize the Emirati will to counter the Houthis or other Shiite militias by creating the perception that they are being attacked from all directions. The inclusion of other groups’ involvement in attacks against the UAE will bolster the consistency and frequency of the attacks and thus serve a further goal of undermining the Emiratis’ efforts to portray the recent events as isolated incidents and not part of a larger trend or campaign. This is overall aimed at delivering a major blow to the Emirati economy and global status.
2. It also lends an additional degree of plausible deniability to Iran, despite its undoubted and well-

documented supply of weapons and technology-sharing to some of these groups. This is because the proliferation of UAV capabilities to different arenas and among different actors, especially by unfamiliar seemingly opaque organizations, reduces the ability of the UAE and its allies to attribute attacks to Tehran or to its prominent and more established regional proxies.

Additional attacks against UAE from either Yemen or territory to north of UAE remains possible over coming weeks

- 1. FORECAST:** Additional attacks will likely be launched and claimed by Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq or other Iran-backed front groups, potentially from Iraqi soil. This will open another (northern) vector of concern to the UAE authorities in terms of aerial defense and may also broadly increase the risk that is posed to the Emirates, including Dubai. This is because both Abu Dhabi and Dubai are several hundred km closer to Shiite-populated areas of southern Iraq than to Houthi-held territories in Yemen. Attacks launched from the north may also be operationally easier to execute as they can fly UAVs and cruise missiles via the sea and circumvent air defense systems deployed to populated areas. An attempted attack against Dubai would correspond with the threats by Alwiyyat al-Waad al-Haq against this specific emirate, as well as to [threats](#) issued by the Houthi military spokesperson against the Expo 2020 international exhibition that is currently being held in Dubai.

ALWIYAT AL-WAAD AL-HAQ'S THREAT AGAINST DUBAI [JANUARY 2021]



HOUTHI THREAT AGAINST EXPO 2020 INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION IN DUBAI [JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2022]



2. **FORECAST:** Given the UAE's increased vigilance and deployment of advanced defense systems by both its own forces and the US, the majority of attacks are likely to be intercepted, which also poses a risk in terms of falling debris or shrapnel from munitions. Nonetheless, should Iran's "axis of resistance" factions be able to coordinate further attacks in a consistent manner, it could hinder the reputation of the Emirates as a stable investment and tourist destination and can adversely impact the personal security perception of both locals and foreigners operating or residing in the country in the long term. Such trends can be expedited by recent advisories by the US and UK advising their nationals to reconsider travel to the UAE given the recent development.
3. Although the incident occurred during the early morning hours of February 2, as per the claims by both perpetrator and UAE authorities, Abu Dhabi only released a statement on the interception after the claim issued by Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq. Thus, it cannot be ruled out that the UAE government is censoring timely information on attacks in cases where it can conceal such information. This is likely part of a policy to downplay the prospective adverse psychological impact of such attacks, preventing further local and international hysteria over repeated aerial operations targeting the country. **FORECAST:** It therefore cannot be ruled out that the diverging narratives and selective release of information will render it more challenging to ascertain the actual impact of such attacks in real time. In some cases, the information may be released several days or even weeks/months after if and when undeniable evidence appears to corroborate a claimed attack. Although this may present challenges to decision-making, it is evident that these Shiite groups are undeterred and continue to possess the capabilities to at least launch, even if unsuccessfully, integrated and sophisticated attacks against strategic sites targeting the UAE.

Recommendations

General Recommendations:

1. Travel to the UAE may continue while adhering to security precautions.

2. **Contact us at Operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434 for itinerary and contingency support plans.**
3. Refrain from taking or sharing photographs or videos of potential security developments, sensitive locations, or security forces and systems in action, as this is liable to prompt detention, imprisonment, and/or deportation.

If an explosion is heard or if sirens are sounded:

1. Immediately seek cover. If a designated shelter exists, immediately go there. If not, go to an internal room or stairwell, preferably on the middle level of the building (i.e. not upper two floors or the ground floor), 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.
2. In an open area, seek cover in a robust structure. If impossible, lay down on the ground and cover your head with your hands. When driving, safely pull over and follow the above instructions.
3. Remain in position for at least ten minutes unless instructed otherwise. UAV attacks may be carried out using swarms of several devices to overwhelm aerial defense systems.
4. Remain cognizant that even if a UAV, a cruise missile, or a ballistic missile is intercepted, falling debris constitutes a significant risk.
5. Following attacks, stay away from any debris and remnants of UAVs and projectiles as they may entail unexploded ordnance which may be triggered upon contact.

Threat of UAVs

1. Those operating at strategic civilian infrastructure and military bases are advised to review security protocols and ensure the provision of suitable shelters that can sustain the impact of munition-dropping and/or explosive-laden UAVs.
2. Conduct awareness training for employees on the risks and threats of UAV attacks.
3. Western companies, particularly US firms with a military/security orientation, are advised to refrain from exposing the specific coordinates of the facilities they operate in to unknown figures due to the potential that such sites could be attacked by GPS-guided UAVs.