

The terror threat of Iran in the Arab Peninsula

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The security services of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain announced in September 2020, that they have thwarted terrorist plots and arrested terrorists in both countries that received support and funding from Iran. The Iranian backed Houthi rebels also conducted in September 2020, a spate of cross-border missile and drone attacks targeting Saudi military and civilian targets.

Iran and Saudi Arabia, two Middle Eastern regional powers, are engaged in a battle over regional hegemony that is being waged between Shiite Iran and its allies and a Sunni Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia at a number of friction points across the Middle East and East Africa. Saudi Arabia and its allies UAE and Bahrain see Iran as the paramount threat to the Middle East's stability because of its support for militias that have inflamed sectarian violence in the region.

For Iran, working with non-State actors such as Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, Shiite militias in Iraq, Saraya al-Ashtar in Bahrain and even Al-Qaeda's east African branch - Al Shabaab in Somalia is an essential part of

its strategy, aimed at expanding its geopolitical influence throughout the region.¹

Iran is using these groups to achieve its strategic goals and create a new balance of power between the regional and international powers active in the region.²

The "Abraham Accords" and the response of Iran

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain officially normalized relations with Israel (the "Abraham Accords") at a signing ceremony at the White House on September 14, 2020. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed the agreements with Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdullatif Al Zayani.³

Tehran, which supports Bahrain's Shiite opposition, condemned the normalization of relations between Israel and Bahrain calling it "shameful." Iran's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that normalization "will remain in the historical memory of the oppressed and downtrodden people of Palestine and the world's free nations forever."⁴

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, also criticized the move saying it is a betrayal of the Palestinian people, as well as a "threat to security in West Asia and the Muslim world."⁵

The "Abraham Accords" led to concerns that Iran could target Bahrain and UAE as it targeted Saudi Arabia with drones and cruise missiles or by conducting terror attacks in the kingdom.

Bahrain

Bahrain announced on September 20, 2020, that it has thwarted a terrorist plot in the Kingdom that received support and funding from Iran. The announcement comes less than a week after Bahrain and United Arab Emirates officially normalized relations with Israel at a signing ceremony at the White House in Washington.

Bahraini newspapers said that the terrorists have planned to blow up several public and security facilities in the country. They conducted surveillance on foreign and national security installations, oil depots and economic targets that could be struck. The members of the group were linked to the Saraya al-Ashtar terror organization and the terror network named "Qassem Soleimani Brigades." ⁶

The terrorists had received explosives and money from the IRGC and around 14 of the terrorists underwent training in camps in Iran and Iraq. Some members of the group returned to Bahrain and started the preparations of a terror campaign in the kingdom and nine of them are apparently fugitives in Iran.

The Bahraini security services thwarted the plot after finding an explosive device on the public street in Al-Badie area placed by the terror group that was intended to target a foreign delegation who came to Bahrain. ⁷

The Bahraini government has often accused Iran of meddling in its internal affairs. On September 10, 2015 Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed bin Mohammed al-Khalifa urged Iran to refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of other countries and said the Islamic Republic should stop what he described as "dualism" between its language and actions. He also

called on Iran to revise its foreign policy.⁸ Bahrain recalled its ambassador from Iran on October 2, 2015.⁹

United Arab Emirate (UAE)

The UAE downgraded its relations with Iran in 2016 amid fierce rivalry between Tehran and Saudi Arabia and the UAE has joined the Saudi led Arab coalition fighting the Houthis in Yemen.

Iran issued an explicit threat on August 18, 2020 to launch an attack against the UAE over its agreement to normalize ties with Israel. President Hassan Rouhani said the UAE had made a “huge mistake” and condemned what he called a betrayal. The Iranian daily Kayhan wrote in a front-page editorial: “The UAE’s great betrayal of the Palestinian people will turn this small, rich country, which is heavily dependent on security, into a legitimate and easy target.”¹⁰

Rouhani’s remarks were seen as “threats” by the UAE which summoned the Iranian charge d’affaires in Abu Dhabi to protest “unacceptable and inflammatory” rhetoric.¹¹

The terror attacks against oil tankers (2019)

On May 12, 2019, four commercial oil tankers were targeted near the strategic Emirati port of Fujairah in the Gulf of Oman. One was flying a UAE flag, and another the Norwegian flag. The other two were owned by Saudi Arabia.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Norway said the attacks required trained divers and explosive charges placed under the waterline, near the engines so as

to not sink the ships or detonate their cargoes, which indicated a knowledge of the design of the targeted ships.

The US blamed Iran for the attack, with US national security adviser John Bolton saying, "I think it is clear these (attacks) were naval mines almost certainly from Iran." ¹² Iran denounced the attack and denied involvement. ¹³

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia took down in September 2020 a terrorist cell that received training by the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) in Iran, arrested 10 individuals and seized weapons and explosives. Three members of the terrorist cell received military and field training at sites belonging to Iran's Revolutionary Guards inside Iran between Oct. 29 and Dec. 8, 2017. The suspects had also been trained to make explosives.¹⁴

The Saudi authorities also seized a cache of weapons and explosives hidden in a house and on a farm. It included four Kalashnikov machine guns, a Heckler and Koch G3 rifle, a sniper rifle, two pistols, an air rifle, 4,620 rounds of ammunition, 18 machine gun and pistol chambers, 14 knives, and military uniforms. Other items included nine explosive devices, 5.28 kilograms of gunpowder, 67 explosive fuses, 51 electric detonators, a welding machine, and a range of capacitors, electrical transformers and electronic components used to make explosive devices.¹⁵

Saudi Arabia is engaged in a region-wide struggle for power and influence with Iran. Saudi Arabia is accusing Iran of fueling unrest among Shias across the region, including among Saudi Arabia's own 10% Shia minority.

Riyadh has accused Tehran of supplying the Houthis in Yemen with missiles and drones used in the attacks on Saudi cities, a charge both Iran and the Houthis reject. The most significant terror attack of Iran against Saudi Arabia took place in September 2019.

The Abqaiq–Khurais attack (2019)

On 14 September 2019, twenty-five drones and missiles were used in predawn attacks on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais oil facilities. The attacks forced the kingdom to shut down half of its oil production capacity, or 5.7 million barrels per day of crude — 5% of the world's global daily oil production.

Yemen's Houthi rebels claimed responsibility for the attack, but U.S. and Saudi investigations came to the conclusion that Iran launched the strike.

The Houthi "September offensive " against Saudi Arabia

The Iran backed Houthi rebels took over the Yemeni capital in September 2014 after ousting President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The Saudi lead coalition intervened in March 2015 to restore Hadi to power, sparking a war which has killed more than 100,000 people, displaced millions and still far from being over.

The Houthi rebels claimed on September 10, 2020, they had launched an attack on an "important target" in Riyadh with ballistic missiles and drones. Spokesman for the Houthi military claimed that a Zulfikar ballistic missile and three Samad-3 drones were used to target a key site in the Saudi capital. "The attacks are a response to the enemy's permanent escalation and its continuing blockade against our country," he said on Twitter. He vowed to launch further attacks on the kingdom if Riyadh

"continues its aggression" against Yemen. Saudi Arabia did not confirm the attacks.¹⁶

Earlier on the same day (September 10, 2020), the Arab Coalition intercepted and destroyed an explosive-laden drone launched from Yemen by the Houthi militia toward Najran in Saudi Arabia.¹⁷

The attack on Riyadh followed five drone and missile attacks towards Saudi Arabia during the last week (6 – 11 September 2020).¹⁸

The Saudi coalition said the Houthi militia launched four drone attacks against Abha International Airport located near Saudi Arabia's southwestern border with Yemen.¹⁹ The Houthis claimed to have targeted Saudi Arabia's Abha Airport twice in less than 48 hours, including one attack involving eight drones.²⁰

In response to the Houthi missile and drone attacks the Arab Coalition carried out airstrikes against Houthi targets:

- The Arab Coalition has destroyed four drones at al-Dulaimi air base north of Sanaa.²¹
- A military engineering camp in Sanaa, where high-level leaders from the Houthi movement had gathered.
- The headquarters of the national security apparatus in the capital, which is controlled by the Houthis²²
- A Houthi military center in Sawan's outskirts, east of Sanaa, used to manufacture ballistic missiles and drones.²³
- The former command center for the Republican Guard, south of Sanaa.²⁴

It was not the first time that the Houthis used the combination of Zulfikar ballistic missile and Samad-3 drones to attack targets in Saudi Arabia. Houthi military spokesman said on March 29, 2020, the group's forces had launched rockets and drones at "sensitive" sites in Riyadh and at economic and military sites in Jazan, Najran and Asir, near the Yemen border. He warned of further "painful operations" against Saudi Arabia if aggression against Yemen continued.²⁵

Iran and Al Shabaab in Somalia

In recent years, there have been increasing signs that Iran and Al-Qaeda's east African branch - Al Shabaab in Somalia have been growing closer. Iran has developed relations with Al-Shabaab militant group in Somalia to promote the Iranian interests and to operate against the enemies of Iran in Somalia and the region.²⁶

Iran has established its presence in Somalia through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC), overseas arm, the Quds Force. The Quds Force uses proxy networks to funnel weapons to the Houthi militia in Yemen and to transit weapons to other countries in Africa such as Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan, Mozambique, and Central African Republic.²⁷

The Quds Force maintains ties with criminal networks, which it uses to circumvent US sanctions in order to smuggle Iranian oil into Somalia and other African countries and later sell it at cheap prices across Africa to subvert US sanctions. Some of the earnings are used to support the Houthi militants in Yemen and Al Shabaab in Somalia.²⁸

Al Shabaab wants to ensure that it continues to receive funding and weapons to enable it to continue its activities in Somalia and the region. This would strengthen its position, enabling it to attract new recruits and reduce defections to the Islamic state group. The group is also keen to extend its geographical control to areas in central and southern Somalia, given the poor security situation in the country and the weakness of the Somali army.²⁹

A captured gang of arms smugglers in Yemen has revealed how Iran supplies weapons to Houthi militias in Yemen through a base in Somalia. The four smugglers have been interrogated since May 2020, when they were arrested with a cache of weapons in Bab el-Mandab strait.³⁰

The gang leader was recruited by the Houthis in 2015. In late 2015, he traveled to Sanaa and met a Houthi smuggler who would be his contact in Iran.

Pretending to be relatives of wounded fighters, the smugglers boarded a humanitarian flight to Oman, and then flew to Iran. They were taken to the port city of Bandar Abbas, where they received a month-long training on using GPS, camouflage, steering vessels and maintaining engines.³¹

The gang leader's recruiter told him he and other fishermen would be based in the Somali coastal city of Berbera, from where they would transport weapons and fuel to the Houthis.³²

Summary

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) are behind the terror networks arrested in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and the Houthi spate of cross-border missile and drone attacks against Saudi Arabia.

The terror attacks came against the backdrop of escalating tensions in the Persian Gulf amid an ongoing crisis between Washington and Tehran following the U.S. pullout from the nuclear deal with Iran, new American sanctions on Iran, the "targeted killing" of Al Quds commander Qassim Soleimani and the US sponsored "Abraham Accords" between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain.

Riyadh has accused Tehran of supplying the Houthis with missiles and drones used in the attacks on Saudi cities, a charge both Iran and the group reject. The Houthis also say they manufacture their own weapons system.

The last attacks on Saudi Arabia are reflecting the Houthi operational capabilities regarding the distance of the target (Saudi capital at 700 km) and the number of drones and missiles that took part in the operation. It is also highlighting the kingdom's military vulnerabilities in defending itself against Iran and its Houthi ally.

By launching missiles and drones against civilian and military targets in Saudi Arabia, the Houthis try to change the military balance of the war in Yemen and to create a new balance of deterrence with the Saudi Arabian led coalition.

Iran poses a clear threat to security and stability in the region and to the strategic interests of the US, Israel, and other regional powers. President Trump's administration is determined to counter Tehran's expanding influence in the Middle East and to support the US allies in the region. The new peace agreements between Bahrain, the UAE and Israel will contribute to the capabilities of the Arab Gulf nations to oppose Iran's regional ambitions.

Iran's subversive activities in the countries of the Arab Peninsula are far from being over but with the new geostrategic structure of the Gulf region and the Trump administration's support, Saudi Arabia and its allies will be able to confront the Shia insurgency backed by Iran.

Notes:

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