

# “AIRBORNE ATTACKS IN THE MIDDLE EAST”



## KEY POINTS FROM AN ‘IISS’ WEBINAR



23 FEBRUARY 2022

### OVERVIEW

The growth in missile and uninhabited aerial vehicle (UAV) capabilities among state and non-state actors in the Middle East has exacerbated existing security dynamics. In particular, the multi-decades investment by Iran and its armed non-state partners in missile and UAV technology, is now translating into harassment and precision strikes against military bases, civilian centres and critical infrastructure in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel.

The recent attacks against the UAE and the 2019 Abqaiq-Khuras attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities highlight the destabilising potential of these capabilities.

In response, several Gulf states have acquired short-range missiles and UAVs and appear increasingly interested in developing their indigenous capabilities in this domain. Although countries in the region have invested in air and missile defences, these systems are not always effective and are expensive to procure and deploy. Airborne attacks are often difficult to attribute, complicating deterrence and punishment strategies.

In a webinar held by the International Institute for Strategic Affairs (IISS), that was chaired by Amnah Ibraheem [*Research Analyst at the IISS-Middle East, specialising in the nuclear and energy policies of the Gulf states*], Iran's capabilities and motivations, as well as the Gulf states' possible responses (diplomacy or deterrence) were explored by a panel of regional experts.

### KEY COMMENTS FROM THE SPEAKERS

1. **DOUGLAS BARRIE** [*Senior Fellow for Military Aerospace at the IISS and a contributor to The Military Balance, the IISS flagship publication*].
  - In the aftermath of the 2019 attacks on Aramco which saw missiles usefully and successfully used, a time-line needs to be drawn up about such attacks given the rising levels of sophistication as well as growing capabilities.
  - The primary purpose of the attacks on Aramco and the more recent attacks against the UAE were mainly for propaganda as opposed to than military purposes.

- Having access to ballistic missiles. lethal UAVs and cruise missiles has provided the Houthis with the capability of both 'hitting back' as well as increasing the challenge to defenders.
- The role of the IRI (Islamic Republic of Iran), with its wide-ranging inventory of missiles and UAVs, has been crucial as these types of weapons are not ones that the Houthis could provide for themselves. Indeed, such levels of technology (especially cruise missiles) are well beyond the capabilities of the Houthis to produce domestically.
- Both UAE and Saudi Arabia (KSA) have the air defence systems for blocking such attacks at this time.
- The UAE became the first country to use the U.S.-built Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in combat. An Emirati THAAD successfully intercepted a midrange ballistic missile targeting an oil facility near Abu Dhabi's Al-Dhafra Air Base on Jan. 17.
- KSA for its part has relied mainly on 'Patriot batteries' for shooting down encroaching missiles. However, the cost of these operations has become an issue given the fact that each time the Kingdom has to fire a missile costing well over one million dollar in order to block or shoot down a UAV/missile costing around \$50-60,000!

2. **WILLIAM ALBERQUE** [Director of Strategy, Technology, and Arms Control at the IISS,]

- The fact that there is a promise of some forward movement in the JCPOA talks (with Bagheri-Kani travelling to Iran for what is perhaps the final time to secure the acceptance of the IRI's 'Supreme National Security Council'), provides a measure of comfort in face of increasing missile attacks from Iranian proxies.
- In the event of an agreement, while Iran would be allowed to sell its oil, have access to financial sectors and have some of the sanction 'waived' (not removed!), the IRI would be expected to reduce its enrichment activities back to 3.75% level it had been agreed to in 2015 (meaning that all enrichment activities beyond that. (i.e., 20% or 60%) would have to stop.
- While for the resolution certain issues, direct US-IRI talks may become inevitable, the Biden administration is nonetheless not in a possession of giving guarantees it cannot keep.
- Key outstanding issues such Iran's missile program of regional activities should first and foremost have been discussed back in 2015. However, it remains important that they be discussed bilaterally at

some point and under whatever pretext once the JCPOA has been revived.

3. **EMILE HOKAYEM** [*Senior Fellow for Middle East Security at the IISS*].

- There have been more than 500 attacks conducted against Saudi Arabia (with perhaps many more unreported, especially around the Kingdom's southern borders). Hence, these attacks have become a critical point of consideration for the KSA.

