Ever since the opening of Dubai Expo 2020 in Dubai, the UAE appears to have become the centre of tourism in the region, adding to its overall standing as a modern, peaceful state. The UAE’s image-politics also involves its legal reforms – in particular, those targeted at attracting foreign (non-Muslim) investors and residents. Abu Dhabi’s pompous self-portrayal notwithstanding, the recent Houthi attack on its oil facilities shows the role the so-called modern state has been playing in driving, both directly and indirectly, a devastating war in Yemen for more than 6 years now. The attack directly undermines the UAE’s self-projections as a peaceful centre of business in the region. Now that the UAE is vulnerable to external attacks means that its narrative about peace, modernisation, development cannot just suppress its role in the deadly war in Yemen – a country on the verge of human catastrophe since 2015 when the Saudi led Arab coalition forces imposed its war to support the Hadi regime after it was ousted by Yemen’s local Houthi movement. Although the UAE had seemingly withdrawn its military from Yemen in 2019 to apparently focus on its economic development and establish itself as a modern state, its war in Yemen never actually came to an end.

The Abu Dhabi attack is, in many ways, a direct manifestation of that very war the UAE is currently fighting via its proxies, including the Giants Brigade. Composed of around 15,000 fighters, the Brigade is allied with the Yemeni
National Resistance coalition fighting against the Houthis. Its website claims that the sole source of funding for the group is the UAE.

Before the attack, the Houthis seized, in the first week of January, an Emirati ship in the red sea, which reportedly had military supplies on-board, showcasing the UAE’s continuing involvement in the war.

Thus, the recent attack came specifically against the backdrop of some recent victories of the UAE-backed Giants Brigade had against the Houthis. In past few weeks, the Brigade was able to push the Houthis out of critical parts of Shabwa province in the south and began contesting parts of Marib as well. This is crucial setback for the Houthis, who have long fought to take control of Marib, which happens to be an energy rich province and the last major northern stronghold for the Yemeni government.

Therefore, the fact the Houthis have now attacked the UAE’s capital shows that the Yemeni rebel forces intend to bring the war home to the UAE. As early investigations have revealed, the Yemeni rebel force used advance weapon systems to cross hundreds of miles of the Saudi desert that separates Yemen from the UAE to give the UAE, the so-called “modernising” Emiratis, a first-hand taste of the war.

Even though the attack was small and did not do any significant material damage to the oil facility, it still carries deep symbolic significance insofar as this attack is being seen as an attack on the UAE’s self-projection as a safe place for tourism, trade and finance. Most crucially, the attack has cast serious doubts on the UAE’s ability to develop - and protect - its US$ 20 billion Barakah nuclear power plant, which is almost complete.

This attack has also given a devastating blow to the UAE’s claims to have an advance air defence system - including its most recently launched SkyKnight defence system - to protect itself against this very sort of attacks. When SkyKnight was recently launched, Edge Group – which developed this system – claimed that it is a “tremendous achievements announced as part of the nation’s aim to establish sovereign defence capabilities, and with the goal to address ever-evolving threats that are not well covered by many players in the market.”

But the failure of the UAE’s air defence system to intercept this attack has left it extremely vulnerable.

Although the UAE has vowed to retaliate - which may mean a more direct involvement of the UAE in the war – this could very much turn into a prelude to a more devastating war for the UAE itself, for the Houthis, as their many post-attack statements have indicated so far, may actually up the ante against Abu Dhabi in the future. They certainly have the capacity.

According to the latest UN Panel of Experts report on Yemen, which was widely leaked, the Houthis now claim to possess advanced drones capable of flying up to 2,000 kilometers, which would put Abu Dhabi International Airport within range of launch points in Sanaa. But an accurate hit from that distance would still be difficult.

Sensing a future escalation, the UAE reached out to Washington immediately after the attack to request redesignating the Houthis as a terrorist organisation, a status the Biden administration had rescinded in February 2021 as part of its push to find a diplomatic solution to the war.

Whether the US will do this or not is as much a moot question as irrelevant the impact of such a designation on the Houthi movement’s ability to resist the Arab coalition both inside and outside of Yemen will actually be. The Houthis were able to wage their war - and stage attacks inside Saudi Arabia – even when they were a designated terrorist group. Given the current state of UAE’s ties with the US – in particular, Abu Dhabi’s embrace of Beijing – it is unlikely that the US will immediately jump in aid of the UAE. Although US officials did condemn the attack, Washington appears to be contend with using the opportunity for the UAE to learn the importance of maintaining ties with the US on Washington’s terms.

For now, the most important question for the UAE is to make sure that such attacks do not happen. Any more attacks inside the UAE will go a long way in turning it into weak state against external attacks. We can, therefore, expect a more vigorous pursuit of militarisation and state of the art weapon systems by the UAE in near future. What, however, is even more important for the UAE to realise the damage it has done to Yemen and scale back its proxy war to protect itself. Whether the UAE would actually reach this decision remains to be seen.

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