

**Saudi Arabia**

## Saudi Arabia turns to Gulf states to replenish depleted air defences

Missile and drone strikes against kingdom by Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen increase as relations with US falter



A test firing of a US-made Patriot missile. Saudi ability to procure weapons from Washington has been complicated by bipartisan criticism of the conduct of its war in Yemen © AP

**Andrew England** in London, **Samer Al-Atrush** in Dubai and **James Politi** in Washington JANUARY 9 2022

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Saudi Arabia has appealed to regional countries for help to replenish the depleted stock of interceptor missiles for its US-made Patriot air-defence system as Yemeni rebels ramp up rocket and drone strikes on the kingdom.

A senior US official said the Biden administration supported the moves to source missiles from the Gulf amid concerns that Riyadh's Patriot stocks could run out in "months" given the current rate of attacks on the kingdom by Houthi rebels. The US has to greenlight transfers of the interceptors.

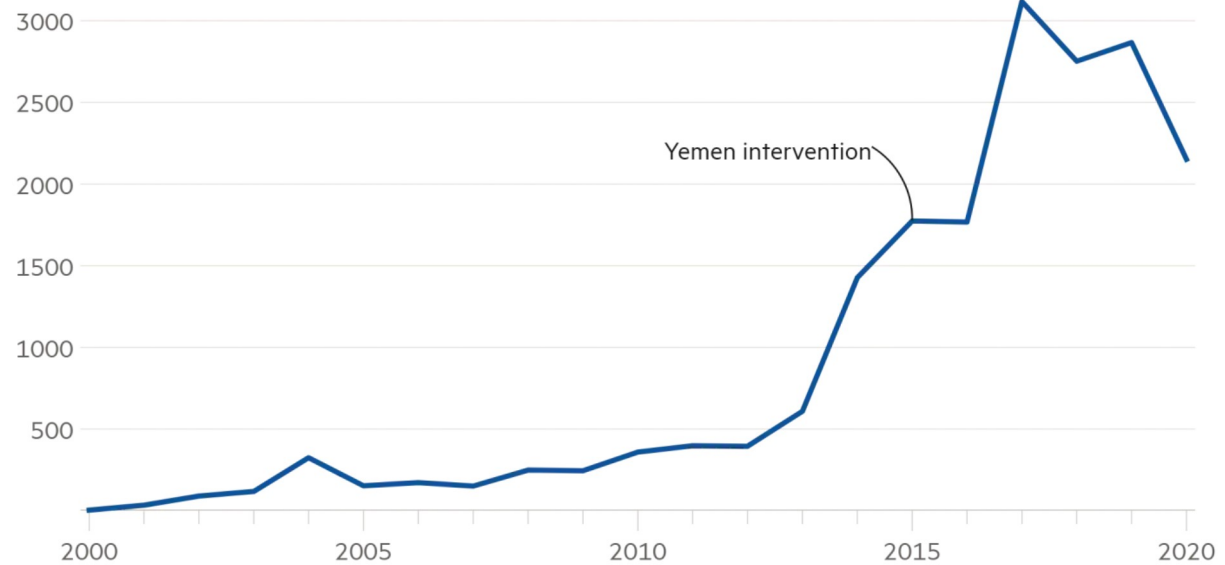
"It's an urgent situation," the official told the Financial Times. "There are other places in the Gulf they can get them from, and we are trying work on that. It may be the faster alternative [to US arms sales]."

Two people briefed on talks between Saudi Arabia and its neighbours confirmed that Riyadh had made such requests. "There is an interceptor shortage. Saudi Arabia has asked its friends for loans, but there are not many to be had," said one of the people.

A second person said Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman hinted at the issue during a Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh in December and the kingdom subsequently contacted nations in the region directly.

## US arms exported to Saudi Arabia

Military capability of arms exported, SIPRI Trend Indicator Value (millions)



TIV is an index score measuring the capability of weapons transferred, rather than actual volume or sales  
 Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database  
 © FT

Experts said it would only be a short-term measure to help cover the time it takes for the kingdom to secure US approval for arms sales. Saudi Arabia sources most of its arms from the US but its ability to procure weapons from Washington has been complicated by bipartisan criticism of the conduct of its war in Yemen, as well as concerns about human rights abuses under Prince Mohammed's leadership.

Another senior administration official said Washington was "working closely with the Saudis and other partner countries to ensure there is no gap in coverage".

A third US official said the Houthi rebels, who are aligned to Iran and control northern Yemen, ramped up their assaults on the kingdom last year, launching 375 cross-border attacks against Saudi Arabia, many of which [targeted oil infrastructure, airports and cities](#).

"Responding to those attacks using those kind of interceptors means that they're going to have a burn rate that is faster than they may have anticipated before," the official said. "That is something that we have to deal with and the answer to that is not only more interceptors, but the answer to that is ultimately a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Yemen."

drones],” he said.



A photo distributed by Houthi rebels shows the launch of a missile aimed at Saudi Arabia in 2018 © REUTERS

US President Joe Biden [froze the sale of offensive weapons](#) to Saudi Arabia shortly after he entered the White House and ended support for the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis.

He pledged to reassess relations with Riyadh and has criticised the kingdom over [the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi](#) by Saudi agents and progressive Democrats are resistant to supporting the kingdom.

Last year, Washington redeployed some Patriot systems out of Saudi Arabia. Biden administration officials insist they are committed to the defence of the kingdom, and the state department has recently approved the sale of 280 air-to-air missiles. In December, the Senate rejected a bipartisan bid to block the \$680m deal.

The senior US official said the 280 air-to-air missiles would be a “big help”. But he

Riyadh's intervention was backed by the US and UK, but its conduct of the war drew widespread criticism and stoked pressure on governments to halt arms sales to the kingdom as thousands of Yemeni civilians were killed in coalition air strikes, including hundreds of children.

Seth G Jones, director of the international security programme at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said that there was growing recognition in Washington of the Houthi threat to Saudi Arabia, and concern that if the US did not support the kingdom, Riyadh would turn to China. More centrist elements of the Democratic party are pushing back against progressives, arguing "we need to defend them [ Saudi Arabia] from adversaries and pre-empt the Chinese moving in", he said.

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