United Arab Emirates

UAE official reveals extent of threat from Houthi attacks

Use of cruise and ballistic missiles make clear the scale of assault on trade and tourism hub

A satellite image of a state oil company facility in Abu Dhabi targeted by Houthi rebels in Yemen on Monday in an attack that killed three workers © AP

Andrew England in London and Samer al-Atrush in Dubai YESTERDAY

Iranian-aligned Yemeni rebels fired cruise and ballistic missiles as well as drones at the United Arab Emirates during this week's attack on the Gulf state, a senior Emirati official has said, underscoring the scale of the assault and the threat posed by the militants.

Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador in Washington, said there were "several attacks", adding that some of the projectiles were intercepted by the Gulf state's defence systems and a "few of them" were not.

Speaking at an event organised by the Jewish Institute for National Security of America, he said a "combination of cruise missiles, ballistic missiles and drones targeted civilian sites in the UAE".

Emirati authorities had initially said attacks by Houthi rebels on Monday — which killed three workers at a state oil company facility in an industrial district of Abu Dhabi and sparked a fire at a construction site at the city's international airport — were caused by "small flying objects, possibly belonging to drones".

But Otaiba's comments confirm it was a much larger and bolder assault on the UAE, which is home to the region's dominant trade, finance and tourism hub. It will heighten concerns about the increasing sophistication of the Houthis' arsenal, and the support they receive from Iran.

backs the rebels militarily, but acknowledges that it supports the Houthis politically.

The Houthis have fired hundreds of missiles and drones into Saudi Arabia, targeting airports, cities and oil infrastructure since Riyadh formed an Arab coalition to fight the rebels in March 2015 after they ousted the Yemeni government. But this week's attack was the first time the UAE, which was Saudi Arabia's main partner in the coalition and deployed thousands of troops to Yemen, has acknowledged such an attack on its territory.

The assault has exposed the vulnerability of the oil-rich nation, which has long prided itself on its security and stability, to militant attacks. In recent months, the UAE has stepped up its efforts to improve relations with Iran and bolster economic ties with the Islamic republic, largely to de-escalate tensions in the region and negate the threat of attacks by Iranian-linked groups.

The Houthis claimed responsibility for the Abu Dhabi attack, saying it was in retaliation for the UAE's role in the civil war in Yemen. Brigadier General Yayha Sarie, a Houthi military spokesman, said after the attack that the rebels had targeted Dubai airport, one of the world's busiest, as well as Abu Dhabi. He also warned foreign companies and residents in the UAE that the movement would "not hesitate to widen its target bank to include even more important sites and installations".

The Gulf state withdrew most of its troops from Yemen in 2019. But in recent weeks a powerful Yemeni faction armed and backed by Abu Dhabi has joined forces battling a Houthi offensive in Marib and Shabwa provinces. The intervention of the UAE-backed militia, known as the Giants Brigades, caused the Houthis to suffer military setbacks.

Otaiba said the UAE had "long left the Yemen war" and said the Gulf state was requesting Washington to reinstate a terrorism designation on the Houthis. Former US president Donald Trump's administration designated the Houthis a terrorist organisation in its final days, despite warnings from the UN and aid organisations that such a move risked triggering a famine in Yemen.

The Biden administration, which has pledged to help end the civil war, lifted the designation weeks after taking office last year. Otaiba said the UAE, an important Arab ally of Washington, had also "passed on some urgent requests [to the US] for our defence needs based on the attacks".