

Middle East war**Military briefing: Houthis expose limits of Saudi Arabia's vast arsenal**

The kingdom is one of the world's top arms buyers but has struggled to keep pace with the Iranian-backed rebels' tactics



In a handout screen grab from a video provided by the Houthi Media Center, Houthi fighters inspect debris of a Saudi F-15 warplane after shooting it down © Houthi Media Center/Getty Images

Charles Clover in London, **Chloe Cornish** in Dubai and **Ahmed Al Omran** in Jeddah

Published 18 HOURS AGO

Saudi Arabia has spent hundreds of billions of dollars building one of the Middle East's most formidable military arsenals, filled with American weapons from Patriot missiles to F-15 fighter planes.

But day after day this month, Houthi attacks have struck targets deep inside the kingdom, including Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport, and exposed the limits of this spending in brutal fashion. On Tuesday, Houthi rebels attacked the Dhahran headquarters of Saudi Aramco, the world's biggest oil company.

Though the kingdom defended itself against barrages of Iranian missiles earlier in the war, analysts and people familiar with the [Saudi](#) military said it had struggled to adapt to rapid changes in the Houthis' tactics and technology. The strain on regional interceptor stocks following months of Iranian bombardment had also complicated the kingdom's ability to defend its large territory, they added.

"There's no such thing as perfect defence. Leaks should always be expected," said Bilal Y Saab, senior managing director of the Trends US consultancy in Washington and an associate fellow at Chatham House think-tank. "That said, airports, not just energy installations, should be part of the list of must-protect critical infrastructure."

PLAY | 00:14

The moment a Houthi missile struck King Khalid International Airport on Saturday © Reuters

Saab said that this was first and foremost "about the [Houthi](#) tactics and the failure of missile defence system co-ordination on the part of the Saudis".

The kingdom allocated the equivalent of 6.5 per cent of GDP to military spending last year, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, one of the highest proportions in the world.

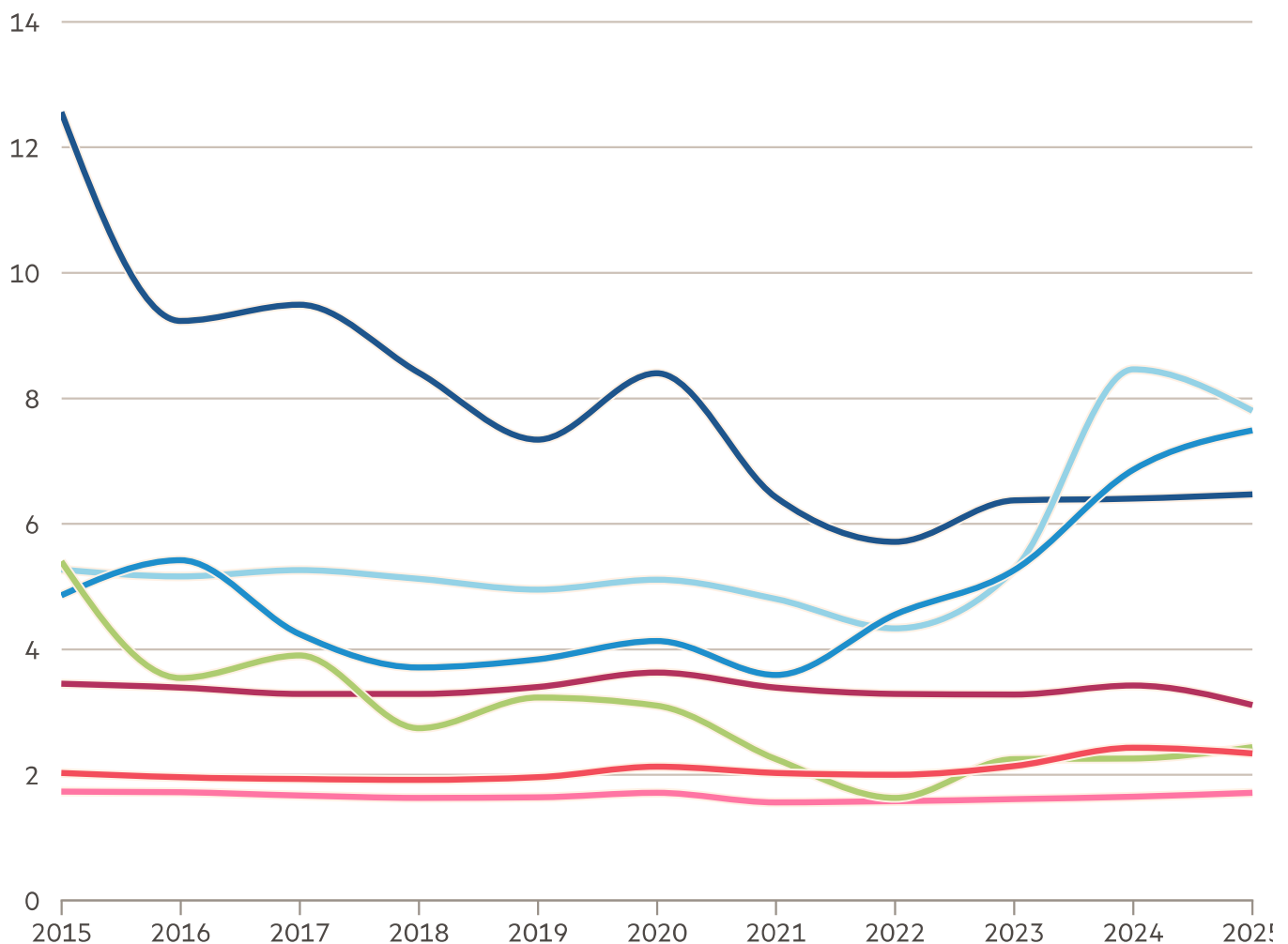
That figure was as high as 13 per cent in 2015, the year Prince Mohammed bin Salman — then the defence minister — sent a military coalition to support the internationally recognised Yemeni government in its fight against the Iran-backed Houthis.

The kingdom would go on to spend years bogged down in the conflict, launching an extensive and costly air campaign against the rebels in a civil war the UN would describe as the world's worst man-made humanitarian crisis, before a 2022 ceasefire.

Saudi Arabia is one of the world's biggest buyers of arms

Military expenditure by country as percentage of GDP

☐ Saudi Arabia
 ☐ Israel
 ☐ Russia
 ☐ USA
 ☐ China
 ☐ Iraq
 ☐ UK



FINANCIAL TIMES

Source: SIPRI Milita

After the US and Israel attacked Iran in February, Saudi air defences initially appeared well placed to protect the kingdom from Iranian strikes, with high interception rates.

But while the truce with the Houthis held at first, it did not last. After Riyadh struck an airport runway in the Houthi-controlled capital Sana'a in July, saying it was trying to prevent an Iranian plane from landing, the rebels announced a blockade of Saudi ships, launched an offensive to capture the Red Sea coast and began bombarding Saudi energy sites, disrupting the kingdom's oil exports.

A separate attack launched by Shia militias in Iraq also temporarily forced the closure of the kingdom's crucial East-West energy pipeline.

REPLAY

Saudi Arabia forces struck Sana'a airport in July © Tasnim

The rebels intensified their campaign against the kingdom's airports this month, after the Saudi-backed Yemeni coalition announced a counteroffensive, forcing the cancellation of thousands of flights. Saturday's [strike on Riyadh's King Khalid airport](#), which is now closed, killed 13 and injured 300 in the deadliest such attack in almost a decade.

But with Saudi commanders having built up years of experience fighting the Houthis, people who have worked with the Saudi military say expertise is not the problem.

“I’ve spent a lot of time working with the leadership of the Royal Saudi Air Defence Forces,” said David Des Roches, professor at the consultancy and education provider Thayer Marshall Institute, who has given education programmes for senior Saudi defence leaders, describing them as “insanely competent”.

Instead, military analysts say, the Houthis have emerged from years of warfare against Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US with a far better understanding of how to penetrate modern radar and interceptors, while the four-year ceasefire with Riyadh gave them a chance to re-arm, with Iran’s help.



Saudi Aramco, majority-owned by the Saudi state, has come under attack from the Houthis targeting the kingdom as part of the war in Yemen, where Riyadh is backing the internationally recognised government © AFP/Getty Images

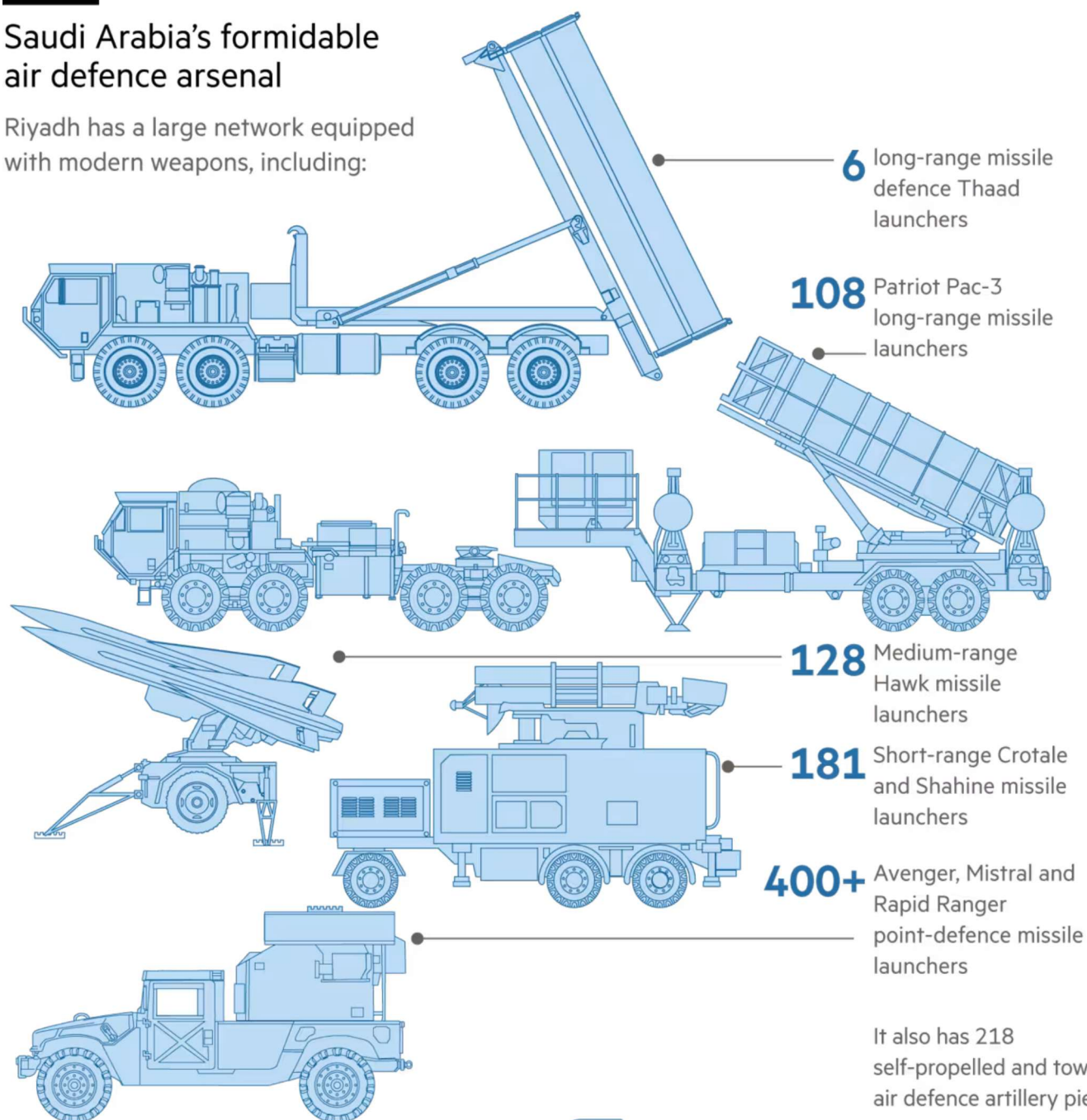
One person briefed on the attacks said Houthis used drones — believed to be the Samad-2 or Samad-3 fixed-wing, long-range strike drones — to map out the ranges of interceptors. They then used cruise missiles, possibly those based on the Iranian Quds-4 missile, that fly lower, slower and can change trajectory, making them hard to detect. “A mix of luck and strategy,” the person said.

“What we are seeing now suggests that the Houthis were also gaining valuable operational experience, learning from failed attacks, adjusting their tactics and improving their ability to challenge sophisticated air-defence systems,” said Mohammed al-Basha, founder of the Washington-based Basha Report consultancy.

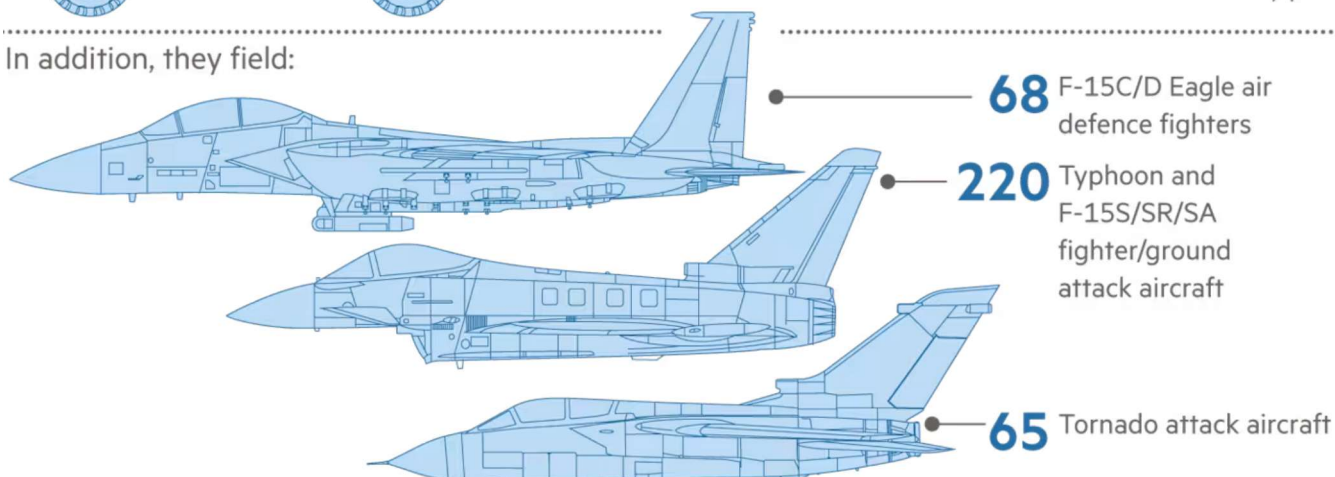
The Houthis have also benefited from lessons learnt by Iran and its regional allies during their confrontations with the US and Israel, including missile strikes against military bases and critical infrastructure across the Gulf. “The Houthis and their Iranian backers have learnt a trick or two about the strengths and limitations of western air-defence systems,” Basha said.

Saudi Arabia's formidable air defence arsenal

Riyadh has a large network equipped with modern weapons, including:

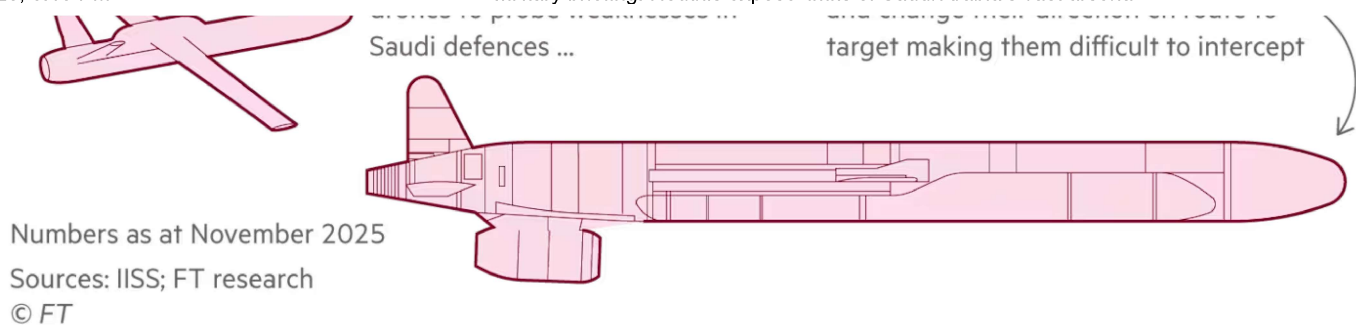


In addition, they field:



The Houthis are believed to have evaded defences by using drones to probe weaknesses in

... then employing cruise missiles such as types based on the Quds-4 to fly low and change their direction en route to



Saudi air defences are extensive and include Patriot and Thaad systems, surface-to-air missiles, interceptor drones, radar networks, electronic warfare equipment and even Sky Shield, a Chinese-made, counter-drone, fibre-optic laser weapon.

But the supply of interceptor missiles is a critical, if ambiguous, variable, analysts say. Since February, Gulf states defended themselves from Iranian missile attacks by liberally using Patriots and Thaad, and current stockpiles — though a closely guarded secret — are widely recognised to be low. The US has warned even its closest allies that supplies of Patriot interceptor missiles are severely constrained, as Washington prioritises its own military requirements.

Saudi Arabia had additional pressure on its air defences because it now had to anticipate threats from both Iran in the east and the Houthis in the south, Des Roches said, meaning “you have to cut your force in half”.

Robert Tollast, a research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London, said with sufficient planning, the Houthis could mass their missiles to overwhelm the defences of even well-defended targets.

“The Saudis find themselves in the same situation as the Ukrainians or the Israelis or the Americans. The production of these interceptors is obviously strained and it’s difficult to prioritise.”

Tollast added that Saudi Arabia was much harder to defend than, say, Israel, with military bases, airports, oil installations and cities spread across a vast territory that no air defence network can protect completely.

The countrywide Houthi attacks were part of a strategy to “thin out” Saudi air-defence assets, said Sascha Bruchmann, Bahrain-based research fellow at the International Institute of Strategic Studies think-tank.

Houthi and Saudi-led coalition strikes

Strikes between October 5-14



Sources: [Institute for the Study of War](#), [LiveUA](#)

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The militants “will target something that’s important to you for days in a row, until you start moving scarce resources to that place, and they observe where these resources come from”, said Bruchmann. “They’re thinning you out and making you move things, to then hit something else that is important to you.”

Tollast said that defending against missile attacks on this scale meant destroying launchers inside Houthi territory, a mix of painstaking intelligence gathering alongside tasking Saudi Arabia’s huge fleet of F-15 fighter aircraft to strike, much as US and Israeli warplanes have located and struck missile launchers in Iran from the air.

“It’s basically a game of ‘whack-a-mole’,” said Tollast, pointing out that even the US and Israel had struggled to eliminate Iran’s mobile missile launchers despite deploying extensive satellite surveillance and drones.

The Houthis are thought to have cave and tunnel networks — natural and man-made — throughout the mountainous north of Yemen and have survived years of Saudi-led air strikes and, more recently, massive American and Israeli bombing campaigns.



Saudi-backed Yemen government soldiers © Ahmad Al-Basha/AFP/Getty Images

Saudi Arabia has turned to allies for help. France said last month it would send soldiers, radars and defence systems to protect the Yanbu oil terminal, while the UK has agreed to provide an RAF Voyager air-to-air refuelling aircraft to “support Saudi defensive activity” in Yemen.

The assault on Saudi Arabia has also put a new defence pact with Turkey and Pakistan to the test, after the countries said this month they had agreed to “activate collective deterrence measures”.

Pakistan, which has long sent troops and military trainers to Saudi Arabia, in April sent fighter jets and pilots to the kingdom, while Turkey has said it is supplying “military forces and capabilities” — though this is not expected to include troops.

But Saudi Arabia’s most important defence partner so far appears less committal.

While Prince Mohammed last month called Donald Trump to seek US support against the militants, the president has remained ambiguous in his public comments about whether to intervene. This has created friction in Riyadh even as Washington continues to provide intelligence and targeting assistance, analysts say.

“The US has been in the business of defending weaker powers against stronger powers, but it’s hard to remember a time they were in the business of defending stronger powers from weaker ones,” said Jon Alterman, Brzezinski chair in global security and geostrategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“Their attitude has been, ‘that’s your job’.”

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