

Has The Yemen Conflict Reached The UAE?

OPSGROUP Team
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On January 17, bomb laden drones reportedly struck oil tankers and a construction site in Abu Dhabi, UAE. The impact sites were close to **OMAA/Abu Dhabi International Airport**.

Around the same time, Al-Houthi rebels claimed the group would be launching an attack “*deep in the UAE*”. While this attack in itself caused no disruption at the airport, it does highlight some serious concerns for safety in UAE airspace, and the wider impact of the conflict and volatility across the Middle East region in general.

What are the concerns?

The precise technical capabilities of the Yemeni rebel forces are not entirely known. In general their drone attacks have **primarily targeted Saudi airports OEAB/Abha and OEGN/Jazan** which lie close to the Yemen border. The capability and intent to send weapons through Saudi Arabia and to target the UAE is an escalation on what they have previously carried out.

Drone attacks in Saudi Arabia are a fairly common and persistent threat, however, Saudi Air Defence systems manage to intercept the vast majority before damage occurs. How these drones avoided detection is a concern.



Smoke and flames from oil tankers targeted near OMAA/Abu Dhabi Airport.

What is the situation in Yemen?

Yemen has been an **active conflict zone since 2014**, with Saudi Arabia leading a coalition of countries from North Africa and West Asia against the rebel forces. OYSN/Sana'a airport has been impacted by multiple airstrikes throughout 2017 and 2018, and continues to be **targeted in response** to attacks such as this one, along with other regions of Yemen with known rebel activity.

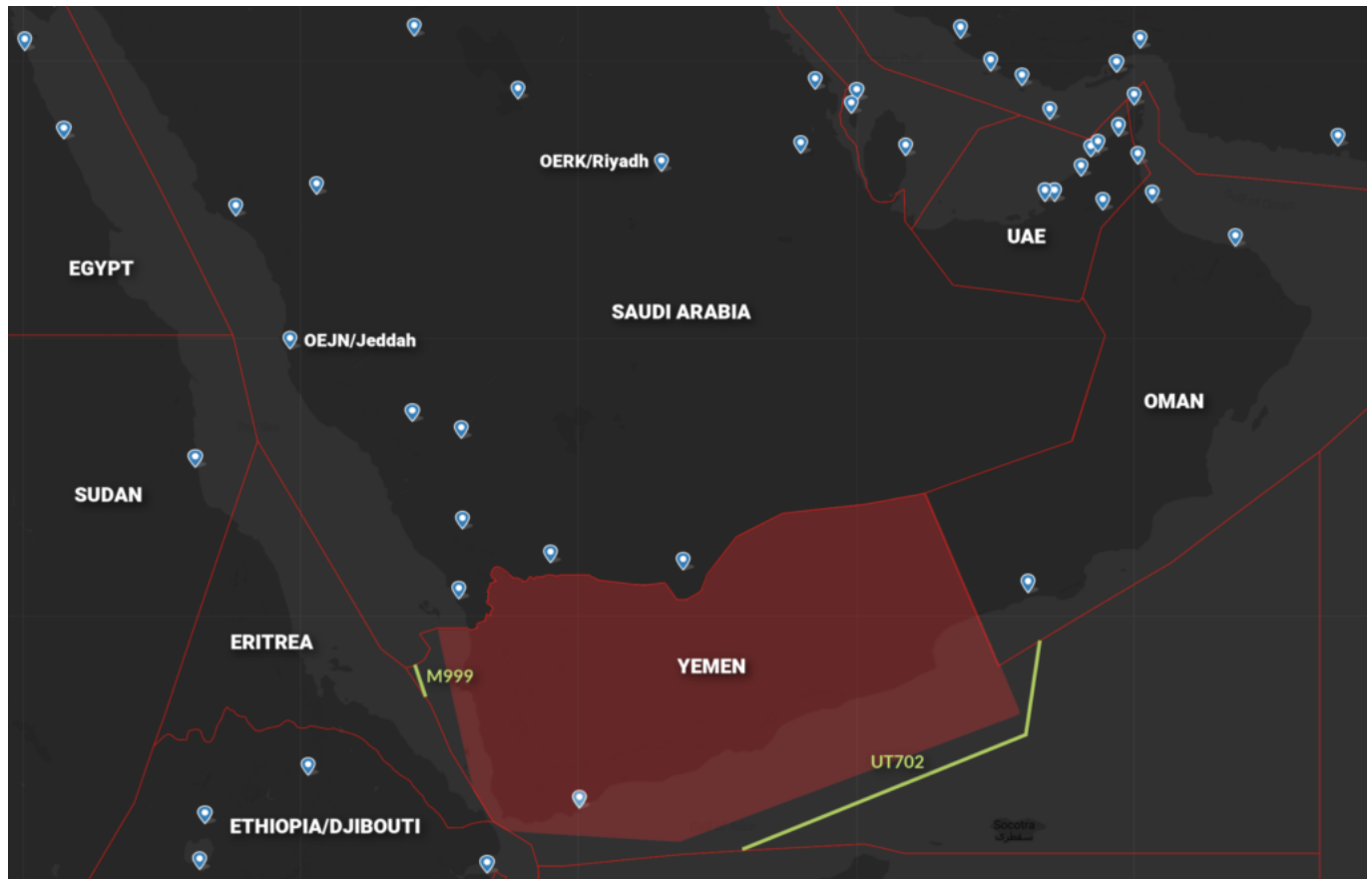
Yemen **airspace is prohibited** by most major authorities. Saudi Arabian airspace has cautions for the **southern Jeddah FIR** bordering Yemen.

What is the general situation in the region?

While missile and drone attacks in Saudi territory have **intensified recently**, attacks against the UAE by the Al-Houthi group have never been confirmed until now.

OEJD/Jeddah lies almost 400 km north along the western coast and has seen some attempted attacks by drones throughout 2021, as well as attempted **missile attacks**.

OERK/Riyadh which lies in central Saudi Arabia has seen a number of attempts as well, however, Al-Houthi rebels denied they were responsible for a recent attempt in Riyadh. This took place in January 2021 and Saudi Air Defences destroyed the drone before any damage occurred. **It was attributed to an Iraqi militant group**.



Yemen airspace is prohibited and the southern Jeddah FIR bordering it has cautions in place.

Does this change the risk level for UAE airspace?

The rebels have suggested they will continue to target the UAE, however, they are targeting 'sensitive sites' on the ground such as oil refineries. There is no apparent intent to target aircraft or civilian airports. Unfortunately, such sites tend to be located along the coast and are in **proximity to busy airspace and major airports.**



Abu Dhabi airport lies along the coast, close to a major port and oil refinery.

Can we mitigate any of the risk?

The UAE have significant military defense capabilities as well. If you are operating into the region, **be aware of increased military helicopter traffic**. Maintain a good listening watch on frequency, and on 121.5.

The UAE do not use special procedures (like the Saudi ESCAT ones) but are **proactive in closing their airspace** if drones are identified within it – be aware of what your **route options and alternate options** are in case this occurs.

Keep an eye on Safeairspace for further updates or changes to the risk rating.