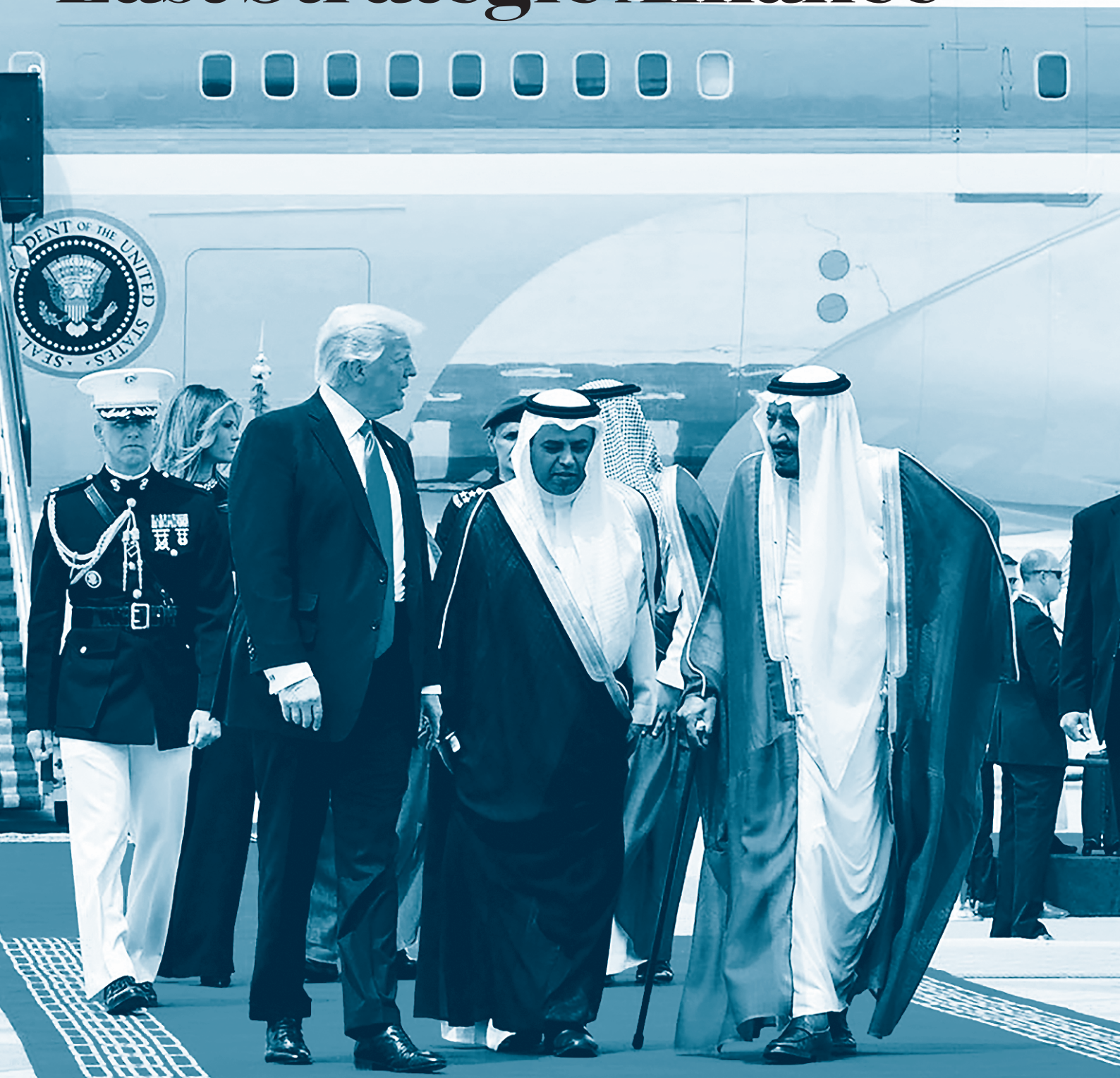


Now is the time to revive the idea of a Middle East Strategic Alliance

UN



Now is the time to revive the idea of a Middle East Strategic Alliance



Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy at the Heritage Foundation.
Twitter: @LukeDCoffey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran's efforts to export of its "revolution," through the activities of its terrorist proxies across the Middle East, tops the list of geopolitical challenges facing the region.

Sensing that President Joe Biden is weak after the US retreat from Afghanistan, and knowing Biden's administration is desperate for a new nuclear deal, Iran's hardliner president, Ebrahim Raisi, feels emboldened.

In recent months, drone and missile strikes by Iran and its proxies have proliferated. There have been attacks on ports, civilian targets, US forces and international shipping.

One initiative to address this threat that deserves greater consideration is the Middle East Strategic Alliance proposal introduced by the Trump administration. The idea of forming a new regional pact was shared publicly during President Donald Trump's trip to Saudi Arabia in May 2017 for the Riyadh Summit, his first official trip outside the US after taking office. At the time the Saudis, like other Gulf Arabs, were focused on building close ties with the new administration after a period of strained bilateral relations during the Obama era as a result of the flawed and risky 2015 Iran

nuclear deal, more formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

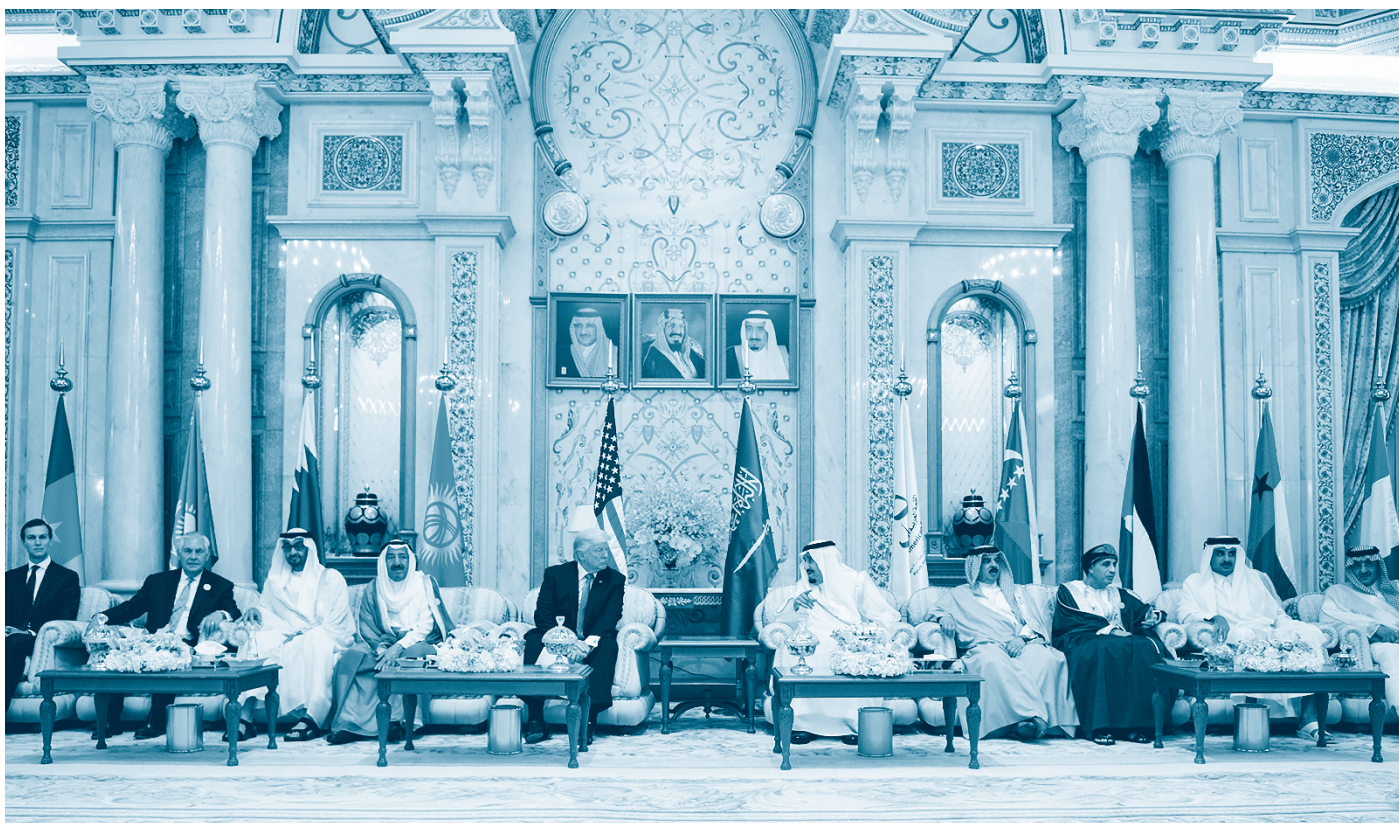
However, while MESA might sound like a good idea in theory, it is proving more difficult to implement in practice, for three reasons. Firstly, there is a lack of trust between the Biden administration and much of the Arab world. Secondly, there is no clear consensus on what form MESA should take; only some of the Gulf countries want the main focus to be on security. Finally, there is a lack of agreement on the main threats to the region.

But even with these challenges, making the effort to create MESA would be worthwhile. US leadership is essential for deterrence and security in the Strait of Hormuz but it cannot do it alone. The free flow of shipping through this bottleneck route is not only a US strategic priority but also of international concern.

With Raisi in power in Iran, provocations by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps can be expected to increase. It will be far easier to deter Iranian aggression in the Gulf now than it would be to defeat it once it has escalated significantly. There is therefore no better time to establish MESA than now.



While MESA might sound like a good idea in theory, it is proving more difficult to implement in practice.



Saudi's King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud (C-R) and US President Donald Trump (C-L) during a meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Riyadh. AFP

THE THREATS

Iran's efforts to export its "revolution" through its terrorist proxies across the region is top of the list of geopolitical challenges facing the Middle East. Sensing that US President Joe Biden is weak in the aftermath of America's retreat from Afghanistan, and aware that the administration in Washington is desperate for a new nuclear deal, Iran's hardliner president, Ebrahim Raisi, feels emboldened.

Drone attacks by Iran and its proxies have proliferated in recent months. In October 2021, for example, US and Syrian opposition forces were targeted at Al-Tanf base in southeastern Syria. Tehran is accused of being behind the strikes¹. At least five drones armed with explosives struck the US section of the base and an area housing Syrian opposition fighters. Luckily, there were no casualties.

Several attempted drone attacks on US forces have been carried out by Iran and its proxies since then but it is not only American targets that are under attack. In January 2022, three civilians were killed and six wounded in Musaffah, an industrial area in Abu Dhabi, when a drone attack by the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen hit three oil trucks². Abu Dhabi and the surrounding region have come under numerous drone and missile attacks from Iran's proxies in recent weeks³.

Threats are also coming from the sea. The naval branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Threats also exist at sea, where the naval branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was very active in 2021. It is thought to be responsible for at least 11 major maritime incidents in the Gulf last year. They included the hijacking of commercial oil tankers, with their crews held hostage⁴, as well as harassment of US warships by IRGC speedboats⁵.

The Iranian threat is not going away. The US and its partners in the region need to adopt a serious approach to Tehran's actions across the region but especially in the Gulf.

TIME TO REVISIT MESA

One initiative that deserves greater consideration than it has so far received is the Middle East Strategic Alliance, a proposal originally put forward by the Trump administration.

Because the type of historical and political circumstances that led to the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949 have largely been absent from the Middle East, the region lacks a similarly strong collective security organization.

The idea of forming a new pact was unveiled publicly during President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017 for the Riyadh Summit, his first official



US President Donald Trump (L) and Saudi's King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud (R) stop for coffee in King Khalid International Airport in 2017. AFP

trip outside the US after taking office. The Saudis, like other Gulf Arab nations, were focused on building close ties with the new administration after a period of strained relations with Washington during the Obama administration, as a result of the flawed and risky 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

The MESA concept dovetailed with the Trump administration's push for greater burden-sharing and a renewed focus on great-power competition under its 2017 National Security Strategy. The thinking behind it was that by building up the military capacity of MESA partners, Washington could promote regional security and stability while freeing up US military forces for deployment in other regions.

Beyond the security component of MESA, there is also a need for greater economic cooperation between the US and the Gulf. This is especially true as we enter a post-COVID era.

The Biden administration needs to dust off the previous administration's plan for MESA and inject new energy into completing this ambitious project.

OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

While MESA might sound good in theory, it has proved difficult to implement in practice for three reasons.

Firstly, there is a lack of trust between the Biden administration and much of the Arab world. More than a year after taking office, Biden has not made a single visit to the Middle East and his contact with leaders in the region has been sparse. The US goal of securing a new deal with Iran at any cost has made many Gulf leaders understandably nervous. Until Biden restores trust among regional leaders it is unlikely that any revival of the MESA idea will be taken seriously.

Secondly, there is no clear consensus on what MESA should look like. Some Gulf countries want the main focus to be on security. At the other end of the scale, others would prefer the focus to be on trade and economics. These issues are not mutually exclusive, however, and a well-rounded MESA should focus on security, economics, trade and energy.

Finally, there is a lack of agreement on the main threats to the region. On one side of the spectrum, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE

take a hawkish view of the threat from Iran. Oman and Qatar, meanwhile, maintain cordial relations with Tehran; the former prides itself on its regional neutrality and the latter shares gas fields with Iran. Kuwait tends to sit somewhere in the middle. This complicates the ability to form an alliance such as MESA.

PAVING THE WAY FOR MESA

But even in the face of these challenges, the effort of creating MESA would be worthwhile. How might this be accomplished?

First and foremost, Biden needs to restore trust in American leadership in the region and the US needs to restore its deterrence capabilities. The president should start simply by paying a visit to the region. At a minimum he should be speaking routinely to his counterparts in the Gulf — but there is no substitute for face-to-face contact.

Presidents Barack Obama and Trump both visited the region during their first year in office. In 2009, Obama delivered his keynote "A New Beginning" speech in Egypt, which focused on US relations with the Muslim world. In 2017, President Trump's first overseas trip was to Saudi Arabia and Israel. That visit laid the foundation for what eventually became the Abraham Accords. Considering the high stakes, Biden's absence from the region amounts to geopolitical negligence.

The short-term US goal should be to lay a strong foundation on which a future MESA can be built. Instead of aiming for the immediate creation of such an alliance, the Biden administration should work with partner countries in the Middle East to build confidence and adopt a step-by-step approach leading up to eventual creation.

This could be done if the US focused less on specific threats and more on improving the military capabilities of countries in the Gulf. Instead of focusing on a particular threat, which will never enjoy a Gulf-wide consensus, the US should identify key gaps in military, security and intelligence-gathering capabilities that all of the countries in the region can address together. This would help to prepare so that a future MESA is ready for all security threats to the region, without overtly specifying that Iran is the source of many of them.

The US should also look beyond security-related issues for MESA. The US should also look beyond security-related issues in



US President Donald Trump (C) and Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud take part in a bilateral meeting at the Saudi Royal Court in Riyadh on May 20, 2017. AFP

relation to MESA. Some Gulf states want the focus of such an alliance primarily to be on security but others would prefer an emphasis on economic cooperation⁶. MESA should be seen as a stool with three legs: security, economics and energy. If one leg is longer than the other, the stool will be unstable at best and at worst, useless. For too long, the US has focused too much on just one of these issues at a time. This is not a healthy or sustainable way to advance US interests in the region.

As a goodwill gesture, and to show that the US is committed to the principles of economic freedom and free trade, the Biden administration should remove the unnecessary steel and aluminum tariffs that were placed on Gulf partners by the Trump administration⁷. Over the years, countries such as Bahrain and Oman have done much to diversify their economies and the steel and aluminum sectors have played a key role in this. Not only are these tariffs bad for the American consumer, they needlessly complicate America's bilateral relationships in the Middle East.

There are two specific areas that the Biden administration should focus on to jump-start MESA. The first is maritime security, which is one area of US-Gulf cooperation that has a track record of success. MESA could build on the existing Combined Maritime Forces already operational in the region⁸. Crucially, the CMF already includes the participation of regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. This

cooperation could be formalized as part of MESA. The second is air defense. With the proliferation of drone and missile strikes by Iran and its proxies in the region, a focus on improved air defenses could show the immediate and tangible effects of MESA.

CONCLUSION

Even with the steady drumbeat of Iranian aggression in the Gulf, it is unlikely that the Biden administration will stand up to Tehran anytime soon. With Iran suggesting that talks might resume, the administration will do nothing to risk upsetting the regime.

Washington's MESA alliance-building efforts to date have been undermined by clashing priorities, policy disputes and the differing threat perceptions among prospective Gulf partners. The US must forge a broad consensus on the mission, the division of labor, and the long-term goals of the proposed alliance before it can jump-start its formation.

US leadership is essential for deterrence and security in the Strait of Hormuz but it cannot do it all alone. The free flow of shipping through this bottleneck route is not only a US strategic priority but also an international priority.

With President Raisi in power in Iran, IRGC provocations can be expected to increase. It will be much easier to deter Iranian aggression in the Gulf now than it would be to defeat it once it has escalated significantly. There is therefore no better time for MESA than now.

FOOTNOTES

1. Martin, D. (CBS News, 2021). Iran believed to be responsible for last week's attack on U.S. military base in Syria. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-drone-attack-us-syria-military-base/>

2. Qiblawi, T. (CNN, 2022). A drone attack in Abu Dhabi could mark a dangerous turning point for the Middle East. Here's what to know. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/18/middleeast/uae-abu-dhabi-houthi-yemen-explainer-intl/index.html>

3. Malekian, S., and Atta, N. (ABC News, 2022). Houthi missile intercepted by UAE during historic Israeli visit raises tensions. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/houthi-missile-intercepted-uae-historic-israeli-visit-raises/story?id=82618825>

4. Gambrell, J. (AP News, 2022). Officials tell AP that Iran seized Vietnamese oil tanker. <https://apnews.com/article/business-middle-east-iran-dubai-united-arab-emirates-e7a3fcffe592a6e5d14ed177daea051a>

5. Liebermann, O. (CNN, 2022). Iranian attack boats harassed US warships in Persian Gulf again on Monday, Navy says. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/27/politics/iran-navy-us-coast-guard-persian-gulf/index.html>

6. Author's interviews with officials from the region.

7. Arabian Business (Arabian Business, 2021). Biden overrules Trump on UAE tariff, keeping aluminum duties. <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/construction/458135-biden-overrules-trump-on-uae-tariff-keeping-aluminium-duties>

8. CMF (The Combined Maritime Forces, U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The CMF is a 34-country coalition of the willing headquartered in Bahrain that has been conducting various security, counterterrorism and counterpiracy operations in the Gulf and the wider region since 2004. <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/>

REFERENCES

Arabian Business (Arabian Business, 2021). Biden overrules Trump on UAE tariff, keeping aluminum duties. <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/construction/458135-biden-overrules-trump-on-uae-tariff-keeping-aluminium-duties>

CMF (The Combined Maritime Forces, U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). The CMF is a 34-country coalition of the willing headquartered in Bahrain that has been conducting various security, counterterrorism and counterpiracy operations in the Gulf and the wider region since 2004. <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/>

Gambrell, J. (AP News, 2022). Officials tell AP that Iran seized Vietnamese oil tanker. <https://apnews.com/article/business-middle-east-iran-dubai-united-arab-emirates-e7a3fcffe592a6e5d14ed177daea051a>

Liebermann, O. (CNN, 2022). Iranian attack

boats harassed US warships in Persian Gulf again on Monday, Navy says. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/27/politics/iran-navy-us-coast-guard-persian-gulf/index.html>

Malekian, S., and Atta, N. (ABC News, 2022). Houthi missile intercepted by UAE during historic Israeli visit raises tensions. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/houthi-missile-intercepted-uae-historic-israeli-visit-raises-story?id=82618825>

Martin, D. (CBS News, 2021). Iran believed to be responsible for last week's attack on U.S. military base in Syria. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-drone-attack-us-syria-military-base/>

Qiblawi, T. (CNN, 2022). A drone attack in Abu Dhabi could mark a dangerous turning point for the Middle East. Here's what to know. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/01/18/middleeast/uae-abu-dhabi-houthi-yemen-explainer-intl/index.html>