Pursuit of performance
Combat capabilities refined

MARITIME MAPPING
Unmanned hydrography in focus

FERTILE GROUND
Middle East proliferation

RAMPING UP RECON
Military EO systems

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here once countries in the Middle East, particularly those in and around the Arabian Peninsula, struggled to fully integrate unmanned systems into their forces, the past year has seen the operational use of such capabilities rapidly increase.

Much of this is down to the ongoing multi-sided conflict in Yemen, where the Iranian-backed Houthi faction remains locked in a military contest with Saudi Arabia and its allies.

Houthi capabilities

While the conflict could be painted as a classical campaign of a modern force contesting a more asymmetric adversary, the reality on the ground is that the Houthi force maintains military capabilities that bely its supposedly rudimentary inventory. Along with long-range rockets, armoured units and ballistic missiles, it has reportedly operated UAVs as well as vehicle-borne (USV) IEDs.

In December, the US State Department issued a warning of what it termed Iran’s ‘malign influence’ across the Middle East, displaying a range of equipment in a staged conference as proof of its assertions.

The weapons systems on display were retrieved from battlefields in the Middle East by ‘US partners in the region’ – primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE, according to Laura Seal, spokesperson for the US DoD.

The four systems displayed were: a short-range ballistic missile; an antitank guided missile; a UAV; and technology that would enable the construction of vehicle-borne IEDs. ‘All four include parts made by [the] Iranian government-run defence industry, and all could have only come from Iran,’ Seal said.

The display included a Qasef-1 UAV operated by Houthi forces, which was recovered by Saudi Arabia. ‘The Qasef-1 can be used as a one-way attack drone – diving on targets kamikaze-style and detonating its warhead upon impact,’ Seal said. ‘Only Iran makes the Qasef-1. It is a member of the Ababil UAV family, designed and produced by the Iranian government.’

Also discovered was a guidance system from an Iranian Shark 33 craft. This is an explosive-laden USV used in an attack on the Saudi Arabian frigate Al Madinah, which killed two crew members and injured three, and left a 1.5x2m hole in the ship’s hull.

‘There are more than half a dozen pieces of evidence demonstrating that these components are directly traceable to Iran. What makes the Shark 33 so dangerous isn’t just that it can explode. It has a guidance system allowing it to track and hit a moving target without an operator on board, so the boat can be deployed to blow up a ship without sending someone on a suicide mission.’

Fertile ground

The complexity of the current geopolitical situation in the Middle East is catalysing renewed interest in unmanned capabilities. With OEMs from several countries vying for the attention of militaries in the region, there is much to be gained by staying one step ahead of the competition.

By Richard Thomas

Israel companies are leading the way in the development of loitering munitions. (Photo: UVision Air)